

John Day River Territory Rural Tourism Studio
Six Month Progress Assessment
May 2011



RURAL TOURISM STUDIO

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A1. Introduction and Key Observations

This report presents a progress assessment of the Rural Tourism Studio (RTS) program in the John Day River Territory (JDRT) region. The RTS program workshops commenced in mid-October 2010 for this region, which initially included Gilliam, Sherman and Wheeler Counties in North Central Oregon. The workshops wrapped up in mid-January, 2011. The information in this report reflects the status of activity four and a half months *after* workshop completion. Several additional program follow up activities are expected to yield results within the next couple of months, as noted in sections to follow.

In Part B1 and B2, I review survey results and compare the anticipated program activities and early outcomes as described in the Rural Tourism Studio logic model with what actually happened in the region. Personal interviews and an email survey show strong evidence that RTS has led to **positive change on most short term parameters in the logic model, especially regarding increased knowledge of market opportunities, increased knowledge of tourism assets and resources, stronger connections within and beyond the region, and clear vision for the future.**

The most prominent **shortfalls in achievement are around increasing the level of participation in action teams, and building broad community support for tourism.** The last RTS workshop meeting did not produce strong momentum for action team expansion: it appears that expectations for action team participation were unclear up until that point and could have been better communicated over the course of the whole program.

In Part B3, I summarize participant observations about needed or desired follow-up. I also compare key findings across the three RTS communities to date. It's clear that many of the RTS program design adaptations, as drawn from the experience of the first two RTS pilot communities, have borne fruit for the John Day River Territory. These adaptations include increased attention to sharing information and building connections with the Regional Destination Marketing Organization (RDMO), making session materials available online in a timely manner, and scheduling a formal debrief/next steps check in. It also appears that **the most critical follow up needs have already been anticipated by Travel Oregon and are being addressed at this time.**

Part C contains Appendices, including summary data from the electronic participant survey, a list of questions used in follow up interviews, and comparative data for the other two completed RTS communities.

In terms of overall context for this region, it is by far the largest (geographically) and most sparsely populated of the Rural Tourism Studio host communities to date. The place of tourism in the region's overall economic development strategy was less developed at the start of the RTS program, and the organizational structure for coordinating tourism development was in flux, with no overarching Destination Marketing Organization (DMO) in place for parts of the region. **Starting conditions have created challenges that make the achievements of the past few months especially noteworthy.**

Three key transitions are planned over the next few months. First, a new regional website, co-branded with and hosted by the RDMO, Eastern Oregon Visitors Association (EOVA), is scheduled for a "soft launch" on June

3rd. This will increase the visibility of area attractions and resources, and, RTS steering committee members hope, increase business involvement in future projects. Second, the steering committee is working to add Grant County as a partner in tourism marketing and development, because many of the region's key visitor experiences are shared with Grant County. Finally, with the assistance of Travel Oregon and its contractor Great Destination Strategies, the steering committee will determine the best way to consolidate its efforts through a clearer organizational structure for future work together. All of these tasks may shape priorities in the matching grant for implementation that is due to be submitted from the RTS group to Travel Oregon in August.

To date, the project has created tremendous good will for Travel Oregon among diverse stakeholders. **The difficulties encountered are primarily attributed to pre-existing dynamics and the overall level of tourism development experience in the region. The successes are attributed to the RTS program services.** As one interviewee noted, "We are on the edge of large leaps forward."

A2. Methodology

This report draws on three sources of information gathered during May, 2011.

1. **Electronic survey** to all participants in workshops, regardless of how many sessions they attended- 10 responses (total sent = 33). The Appendix includes a summary of key survey findings. The full survey and results are available through the Travel Oregon survey monkey account.
2. Phone or in-person **interviews with steering committee members and other key stakeholders** as recommended by Travel Oregon. The Appendix includes a summary of key interview questions.
 - Kara Wilson Anglin, Wilson Ranches Retreat
 - Jessica Bates, Gilliam County Economic Development
 - Will Boettner, Oregon Paleo-Adventures
 - Chris Havel, Oregon Department of Parks and Recreation
 - Sherry Kaseberg, Sherman County Historical Society
 - Beth McCurdy, Sherman County Fair
 - Jessica Metta, Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
 - Anne Mitchell, Oregon Paleo Lands Institute
 - Melva Thomas, Sherman County Court
 - Alice Trindle, Eastern Oregon Visitors Association
 - Penny Woodson, Condon Chamber of Commerce
3. Reviewed **RTS documentation** of products developed during workshops and action planning notes from the last workshop.

B1. Survey and Interview Findings

The personal interviews and an email survey show strong evidence that RTS has led to positive change on most short term parameters in the logic model. The most often cited change is a stronger relationship with Eastern Oregon Visitors Association, the RDMO, that has resulted in a new sub-regional brand, website and marketing materials to highlight the John Day River Territory tourism assets. Another key outcome has been increased awareness of the JDRT region's tourism potential, with diverse and unique assets often unknown even by long term residents.

According to the e-survey, RTS had a positive impact on all variables related to the level of personal engagement in future tourism development, and on community conditions related to tourism. However, respondents indicated a stronger causal relationship between RTS and the level of personal engagement than between RTS and community conditions.

In terms of level of personal engagement, the two indicators (of 6) that changed the most, ended the highest, and were the most affected by RTS were:

- Knowledge of emerging market opportunities for tourism development (+50%)
- Awareness of assets and resources for tourism development (+30%)

See Table C1a for detail.

In terms of community conditions related to tourism, the four indicators (of 12) that changed the most were:

- Level of trust within the community around tourism development (+71%)
- Clarity of action plan for tourism development (+64%)
- Clarity of community priorities for tourism development (+53%)
- General community support for tourism as an economic development strategy (+53%)

These were among the lowest ranked community conditions at the start of RTS. See Table C1b for detail.

In terms of the causal effect of RTS on community conditions, respondents judged it to be highest for:

- **Our area's ability to attract new visitors**

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

- *"The biggest coup has been coalescing as our own region, with our own identity."*
- *"Our relationship with Eastern Oregon Visitors Association changed during RTS- we are much more connected and involved."*
- *"The coordination of a new sub-region branding and marketing with the RDMO branding and website could be statewide model."*
- *"I had no idea we had so many resources locally . . . Tourism for a day was so fun! We drove in my new car, and at the end of the day, couldn't tell its color because it was covered with mud!"*
- *"I learned about the other people who went and their hidden talents, built stronger relationships."*
- *"Key message—don't think you can't do it!"*

- *“We have come a long way in the two years since we began working on this: RTS provided great tools and a feeling of legitimacy about what we are trying to do.”*
- *“Vision and productivity is coming-- A month will make a big difference in results.”*
- *“Without RTS, it would have taken 10 years to accomplish what we’ve been able to do.”*
- *“I think if we can show some success (more tourists, more dollars coming in, community and political support will increase.”*
- *“Whoever lined up the presenters did a great job: a huge gamut of resources, very professional, brought quality to our little remote section of the state.”*
- *“We so appreciate the outpouring of resources and knowledge from Travel Oregon and Eastern Oregon Visitors Association.”*

The personal interviews and the email survey also reveal some challenges. According to the survey, “The level of trust within the community around tourism work” is the most improved community condition after the Rural Tourism Studio. At the same time, several participants cited a breakdown in trust and working relationships among RTS participants, especially during the action planning workshop. Here are some quotes about the **challenges to achieving additional positive outcomes.**

- *“A challenge for the steering committee will be how to form as a real organization- I am glad that Travel Oregon is bringing in additional help for this.”*
- *“Many tourism providers (businesses) do not see the need to participate, collaborate or support county or regional efforts.”*
- *“There are still just a few people willing to accept the responsibility for implementation at this time.”*
- *“We struggled at the exit of the program—there was a failure of communications about long term participation, expectations. Led to some fallout and disillusionment.”*
- *“Be sure folks know ahead of time that they are expected to commit long term- I felt blindsided.”*
- *“The communities of our region have different levels of capacity to contribute to tourism development efforts- budget, political priorities, and organizational capacity. When we add Grant County, it gets even more complicated.”*
- *“There’s a culture of blending in, of cutting down experts, of thinking we already know everything there is to know, that we have to overcome.”*
- *“We’ve been afraid to communicate too much with the community because what we were doing was so nebulous, and our relationships fragile. Now that we will have a tangible outcome in the new website, it will be easier to build momentum.”*

B2. Logic Model vs. Actual Activities and Outcomes

The chart below summarizes the **logic model milestones and associated indicators of progress** in the John Day River Territory area.

Immediate outcomes as per logic model:

<p>Formation of action teams to move ideas and projects forward</p>	<p>Yes. Workshop participants self-organized into three action teams at the final RTS workshop in January. Action teams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience Creators (4 members): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Develop a regional Map for web and kiosk, with individual itineraries that interact with amp • Outdoor Recreation (4 members) • Master Plan for Recreational Development (4 members) • Marketing (6 members) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Website, brochures, booth development <p>The steering committee has also remained active—much overlap in membership with the marketing team.</p>
<p>Newer, more diverse mix of people involved with action teams</p>	<p>No. The action teams include only two people who were not actively engaged in regional tourism development prior to the start of the RTS program.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The general sense from interviews is that the same people, with these two exceptions, are working more effectively together with more focus. • There has been some breakdown in communications around action teams. Not clear to several participants that they would be expected to join an action team after the RTS workshop series complete.
<p>New awareness and knowledge of tourism development opportunities and resources</p>	<p>Yes, this was cited as a major benefit in personal interviews, and in survey results. <i>See Tables C1a through C1c.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased knowledge of tourism market opportunities, and increased awareness of assets and resources for tourism development, were the most highly rated in terms of impact of RTS and in level of this after the program.
<p>New connections made across diverse sectors in the community</p>	<p>Yes, cited in survey results and interviews.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New working relationships across counties among participants • Stronger connections with State Parks and Recreation around development of Cottonwood Canyon State Park • Increased coordination of marketing budgets for tourism (two different groups had received recent grants for tourism marketing before the RTS launched) • As noted below, much stronger relationship with RMDO, Eastern Oregon Visitors Association
<p>Community in agreement on a vision for tourism in their area and critical next steps to move forward</p>	<p>Yes, Vision statement and action plan complete. Clarity of vision is one of the community conditions for tourism most impacted by RTS, according to the e-survey.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The vision statement represents agreement among RTS participants, but there is concern about whether there is broader community or political

	<p>support for tourism. This is not a region traditionally dependent on tourism, and community support for expanded tourism is tenuous, according to interviews.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See notes on action plan below for related comments.
Establish deeper relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	<p>Yes, much closer collaboration with RDMO (Eastern Oregon Visitors Association) on regional and sub-regional branding and marketing activities. EOVA believes that this collaboration, which will be implemented through a shared website (with localized portal) and other activities, could be a model for other RDMO/DMO collaborations statewide.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great appreciation expressed for Travel Oregon being so directly involved in this project—Marketing and RTS staff

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

Action teams meet, grow, make decisions on priorities, begin implementation	<p>Somewhat. All action teams have met- little evidence of growth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The marketing committee is largely intact and actively working with the RDMO to launch new marketing projects in coordination with EOVA. Soft launch of new regional website on June 3. • Experience Creators: two people, but very active in developing itineraries. Expect to have project ready for implementation with matching funds from Travel Oregon. • Recreation plan- Since the end of RTS, the outdoor recreation team has disbanded, and its project put on hold as a Phase II activity. • The steering committee is also still actively meeting, with membership that greatly overlaps marketing committee
Submittal of matching grant applications to Travel Oregon that reflect clear connections to goals of RTS	<p>Not applicable yet, but appears to be on track. The matching grant application for implementation has not yet been submitted to Travel Oregon, but not due until August 30.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EOVA branding, website roll out has taken most of the group’s short term energy. The initial budget for this marketing work was already in place • There are a couple of ideas for next steps, to be determined after website launch. Likely to be follow up on Experience Creator action team’s work.
Products from RTS completed (e.g. strategic plan, vision, asset inventory, etc)	<p>Yes, the vision, interim goals, action plan and asset inventories were completed during the RTS workshops.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action plan does not reflect richness of ideas discussed during asset inventories and iterative action planning during earlier workshops (e.g. cultural tourism related). Is there a way to revisit those ideas more formally at end of workshop series?
Follow up assistance provided from Travel Oregon, Regional Destination marketing organizations (RDMO), and partners	<p>Yes, Travel Oregon and Eastern Oregon Visitors Association are providing follow up support with branding, website launch, and marketing materials to align with larger EOVA regional brand and marketing activities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Travel Oregon has also engaged Great Destination Strategies to help the steering committee determine the appropriate organizational structure for its tourism marketing and development efforts (right now, no formal DMO in the three county region and JDRT steering committee is not a formal organization). There is currently tension about best structure for moving

	forward.
Ongoing evaluation	Yes. Still need visitor profile data to track changes at sub-state level in timely manner. Survey tool is complete, awaiting Travel Oregon follow up.

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

Visible synergy and momentum of action teams	Partially achieved. Yes for marketing and to a lesser extent (yet) for Experience Creators team. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Still a small number of active participants. • According to interview, the RTS program has facilitated the state’s effectiveness in coordinating development plans for the new Cottonwood Canyon State Park, which has much momentum now. • Several people have dropped out of action teams since they were formed, apparently due to frustrating interpersonal dynamics
New projects underway or progress on pre-existing projects	Yes. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Itinerary development by Experience Creators • Sub-regional branding and website to be launched June 3
Businesses are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	Yes. According to an electronic survey of businesses in the area, also conducted during May 2011 (separate report), 8 of 14 respondents indicated they have developed new products or services targeting the visitor market during the past six months.
Public and nonprofit support organizations are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	Some early indication of this. Sherman County Historical Society is broadening use of social media to reach visitor markets. Sherman County Fair Board is refining event schedule and content to attract more visitors. Oregon Paleo Institute continues to expand its tour packages and events, and has higher pre-bookings than last year at this time.
New partnerships and new resources for tourism development, including more integrated relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	Yes, as noted above with respect to Travel Oregon, EOVA, and JDRT tourism steering committee members. Also stronger partnership with State Parks and Recreation as noted above. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The outreach and integration of Grant County with the original three counties in the John Day River Territory will pose challenges in terms of building a shared agenda and organizational structure. • It is good that Travel Oregon has brought Great Destination Strategies in as a resource for building an effective DMO structure for the region.
Increased integration of tourism planning with other community and regional planning, other community and regional stakeholders	Not yet. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several other planning efforts preceded the RTS, as noted in the baseline assessment, with some focus on tourism. Tourism is still not heavily emphasized in regional plans. • Uneven capacity among counties to contribute to tourism development efforts- budget, political priorities, organizational capacity. Gilliam County’s longer term future commitment is uncertain given change in staffing capacity.

B3. Comparison across RTS Communities and Opportunities for Follow up

Appendix C3 includes several tables that compare the John Day River Territory RTS survey results with those from the first two pilot RTS communities.

- While the JDRT had a **similar starting point on indicators related to the level of personal engagement in tourism development, there was less change in the level of personal engagement** than for the first two communities. Based on the interviews, this finding is likely related to the confusion associated with action planning at the last RTS workshop.
- The JDRT region led the three RTS communities in terms of the **increase in knowledge of “market opportunities related to tourism development.”**
- JDRT reported **weaker community conditions for tourism development across most indicators at the start of the RTS program.** The starting level of “collaboration around tourism” was particularly low relative to the other two RTS communities.
- Of the three RTS communities to date, the **JDRT group reported the greatest rise in “clarity of action plan”.** This may reflect the very specific and (as indicated by participants) exciting joint work planned with EOVA for branding and marketing. From an evaluation perspective, the final action plan could be even more dynamic if it reflected more of the specific ideas developed iteratively during the RTS workshops. It is unclear how much the interim work was referenced in developing the final action plan.

In general, participants were very pleased with the program. In response to the question “What has had lasting value for you since the RTS workshops,” participants were very positive about all program aspects. In particular, they highlighted **“connections” as the take-away of most lasting value to date:** “connections with expert presenters, with others in my community, and with regional and statewide tourism development organizations.”

The follow up support for marketing and organizational development being provided by EOVA and Travel Oregon is valued, timely, and important as a foundation for additional progress. This is especially true in a region with so little marketing and organizational infrastructure in place at the start of RTS.

The level of general community support for tourism was rated as relatively high in the electronic survey, but cited in interviews as a major problem. **There may be a future role for the RTS program to help communities improve communications and marketing of their efforts within their own regions** as part of their work plan.

As the total number of participants and communities grow, Travel Oregon will be challenged to find economies of scale for delivery, evaluation and ongoing post-program support. One JDRT participant suggested the idea of an on-line RTS alumni network as a mechanism for keeping community leaders connected with ideas and support. This idea has merit!

Finally, ongoing funding for marketing and tourism product development will continue to be a challenge for this and many other rural regions of the state. As Travel Oregon’s tourism development programs continue to grow, it would be worth considering a **broader fund development/leveraging role for TO beyond the current matching grant program,** specifically focused on product development.

C1. Appendix- Electronic Survey Results

Overview of Respondents

- 30.3% response rate: 10 survey respondents out of 33 who attended and had email address on record. This is the highest response rate to six month follow up participant survey in the three RTS communities to date.
- 4 respondents were members of the RTS Project Steering Committee
- 70% of respondents attended at least 4 different RTS workshops/events.
- The two workshops with the highest percentage of respondents attending were the “Community Tourism Planning- Part 2” workshop” and the “Tourism Marketing on a Shoestring” workshop.
- These same two workshops also drew the most total participants (16 and 18 respectively) during the JDRT Rural Tourism Studio series. Additionally, the Cultural Heritage Tourism workshop drew 16 participants.
- 6 of the ten respondents are currently members of action committees. 4 responded that they were not participating on an action committee.

Table C1a: Level of Personal Engagement in Tourism Development

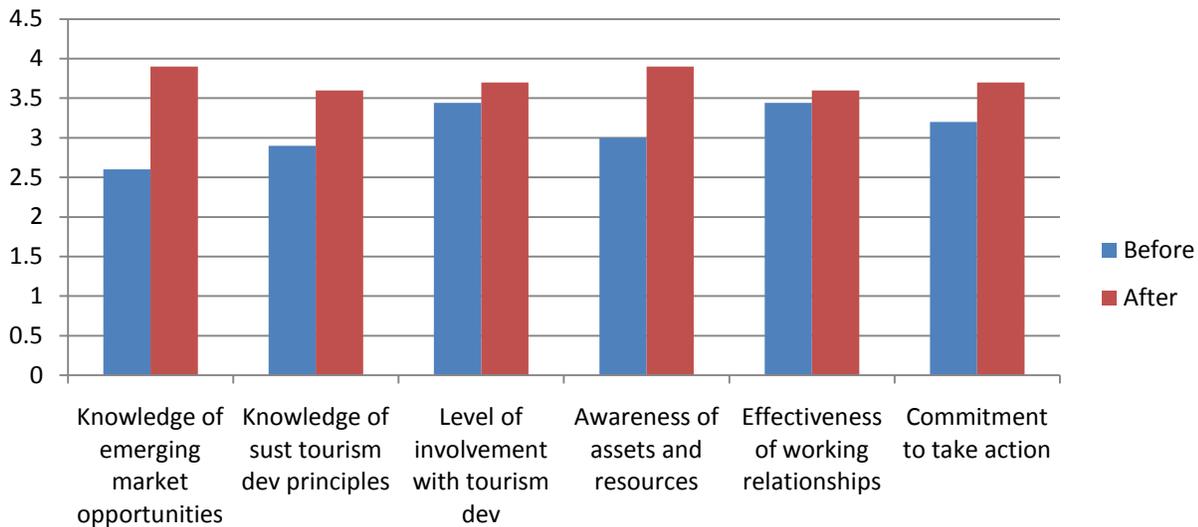


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “low” and 5 being “high”

Please rate the following on a scale of 1 to 5: (1 = low, 5 = high):

	Pre-RTS (Sep 10)	6 months post-RTS (May 11)	% Change	Perceived impact of RTS on any changes noted	Importance of this factor in shaping future tourism
Your knowledge of emerging market opportunities for tourism development	2.60	3.90	+50.0%	4.00	4.10
Your knowledge of sustainable tourism development principles	2.90	3.60	+24.1%	3.90	3.90
Your level of involvement with tourism development in your community	3.44	3.70	+7.6%	3.40	4.20
Your awareness of assets and resources for tourism development	3.00	3.90	+30.0%	4.00	4.70
Effectiveness of your working relationships with other organizations working on tourism development	3.44	3.60	+4.7%	3.70	4.10
Your commitment to take specific action to tap tourism development opportunities in your community	3.20	3.70	+15.6%	3.60	4.00

Table C1b: Change in Community Conditions related to Tourism Development

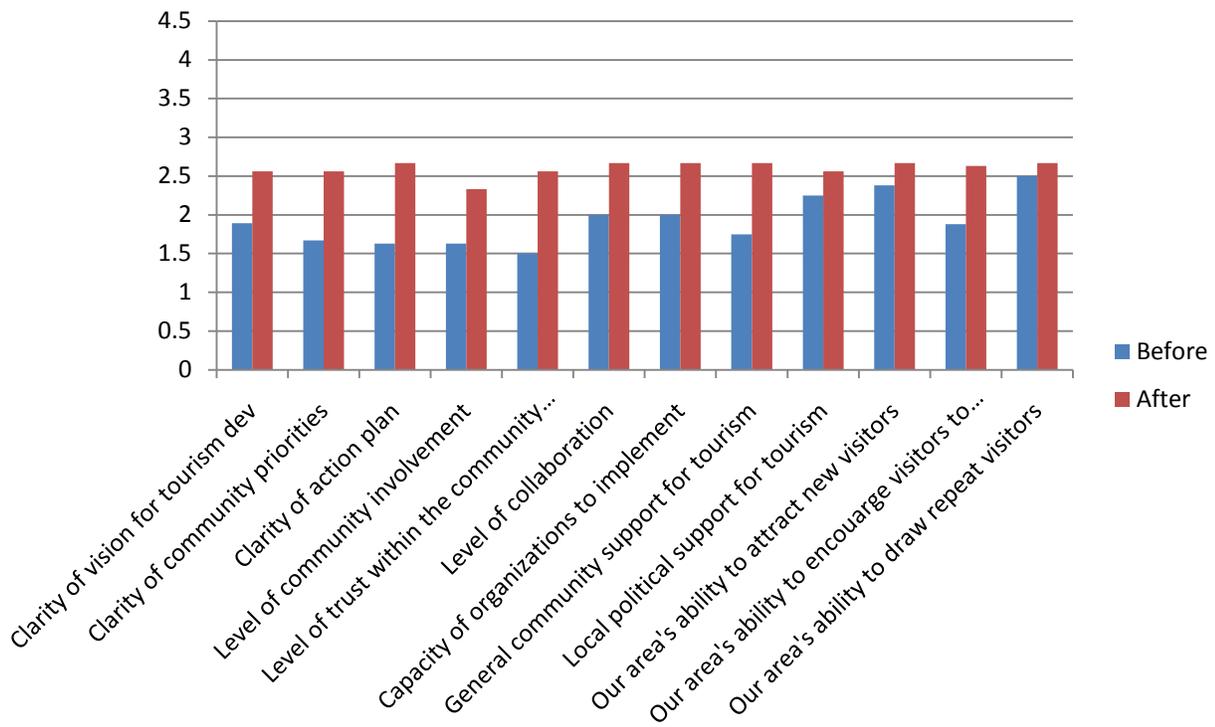


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being "weak" and 5 being "strong"

How strong are the following conditions related to tourism in your community? (On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = weak, and 5 = strong)

	Pre-RTS (Sep 09)	6 months post-RTS (Jun 10)	% Change	Perceived impact of RTS on any changes noted	Importance of this factor in shaping future tourism
Clarity of community vision for tourism development	1.89	2.56	+35.4%	3.00	4.40
Clarity of community priorities for tourism development	1.67	2.56	+53.3%	3.00	4.50
Clarity of action plan for tourism development in your community	1.63	2.67	+63.8%	2.90	4.70
Level of community involvement in tourism development efforts	1.63	2.33	+42.9%	2.80	4.50
Level of trust within the community around tourism work	1.50	2.56	+70.7%	2.78	4.50
Level of collaboration for tourism development efforts	2.00	2.67	+33.5%	2.70	4.60
Capacity of organizations in your community to implement successful tourism development project	2.00	2.67	+33.5%	2.60	4.50
General community support for tourism as an economic development strategy	1.75	2.56	+52.6%	2.60	4.40
Local political support for tourism as an economic development strategy	2.25	2.63	+13.8%	2.70	4.30
Our area's ability to attract new visitors	2.38	2.67	+12.2%	3.10	4.40
Our area's ability to encourage visitors to stay longer	1.88	2.63	+39.9%	2.78	4.60
Our area's ability to draw repeat visitors	2.50	2.67	+6.8%	3.00	4.60

Table C1c: What has had lasting value for you since the Rural Tourism Studio workshops?

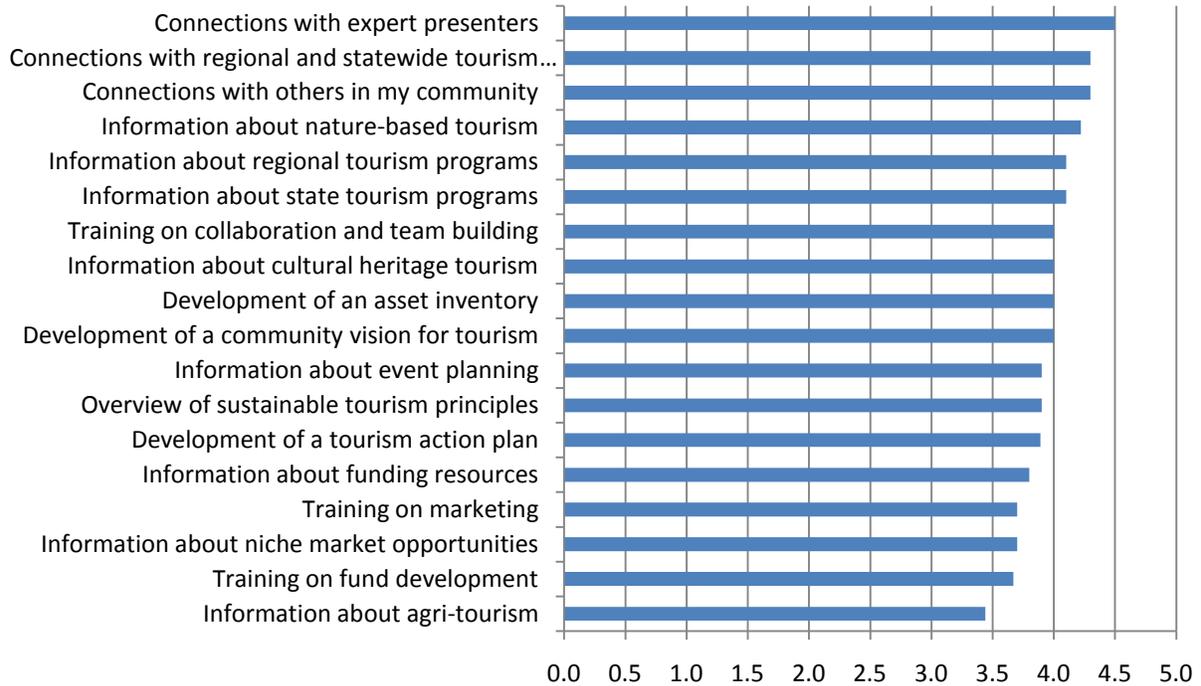


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not useful” and 5 being “extremely useful”

C2. Appendix- Stakeholder Interview Questions

1. Projects and action

- a. Tell me about what's been happening related to tourism since the RTS program workshops concluded in January. (What are the projects and how are you involved?)
- b. How close are you to submitting the follow up grant application to Travel Oregon? Any tough decisions there, or was it easy to agree?
- c. What are you most excited about in terms of each project or tourism development in general?
- d. How about any challenges that the projects or tourism development in general will face? Do you have any concerns?

2. Changes

- a. What changes have you seen related to tourism development after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?
- b. What changes in relationships/collaboration have you seen after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?
- c. What changes do you see in the level of involvement in tourism development after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?

4. Other

- a. Is there anything specific you've really found useful that you gained from the RTS experience?
- b. Is there anything that Travel Oregon could do now to help you succeed?
- c. Anything else you want me to know that I haven't asked about?

C3 Appendix: Comparisons with Other RTS Community Six Month Survey Results

Table C3a: Starting Level of Personal Engagement in Tourism Development, by RTS Community

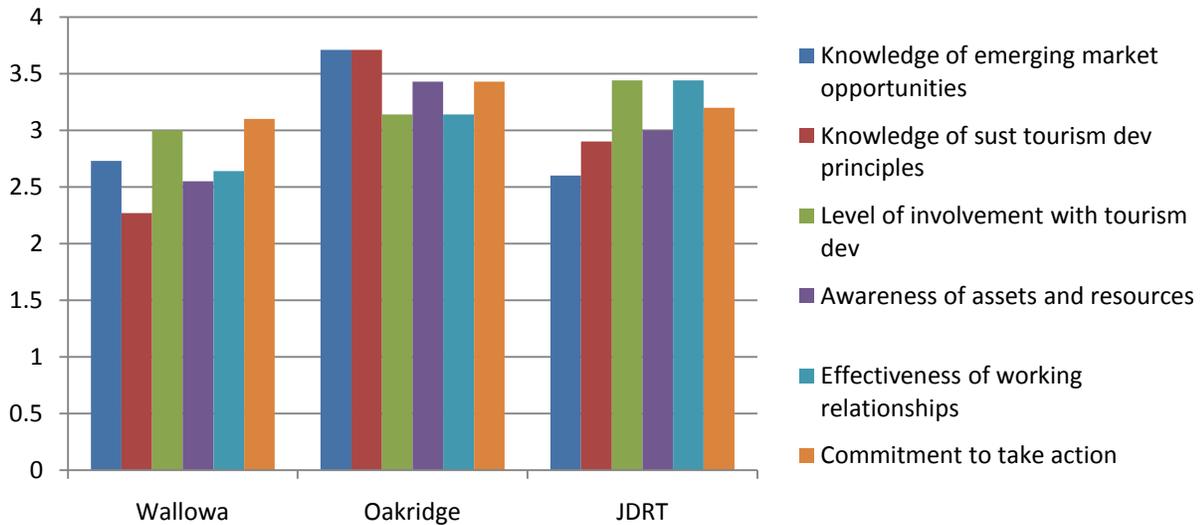


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being "low" and 5 being "high"

Table C3b: % Change in Level of Personal Engagement in Tourism Development, by RTS Community

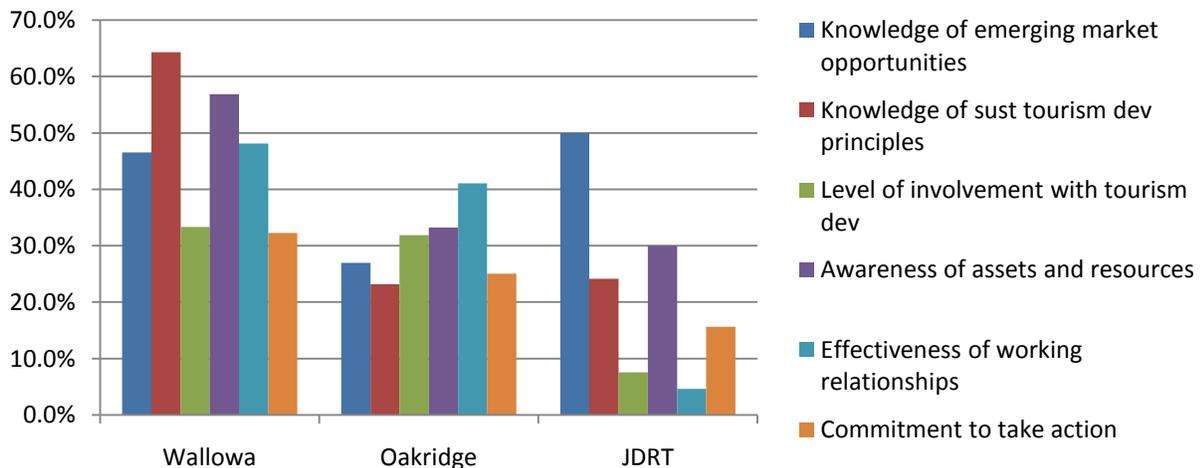


Table C3c: Starting Community Conditions for Tourism Development, by RTS Community

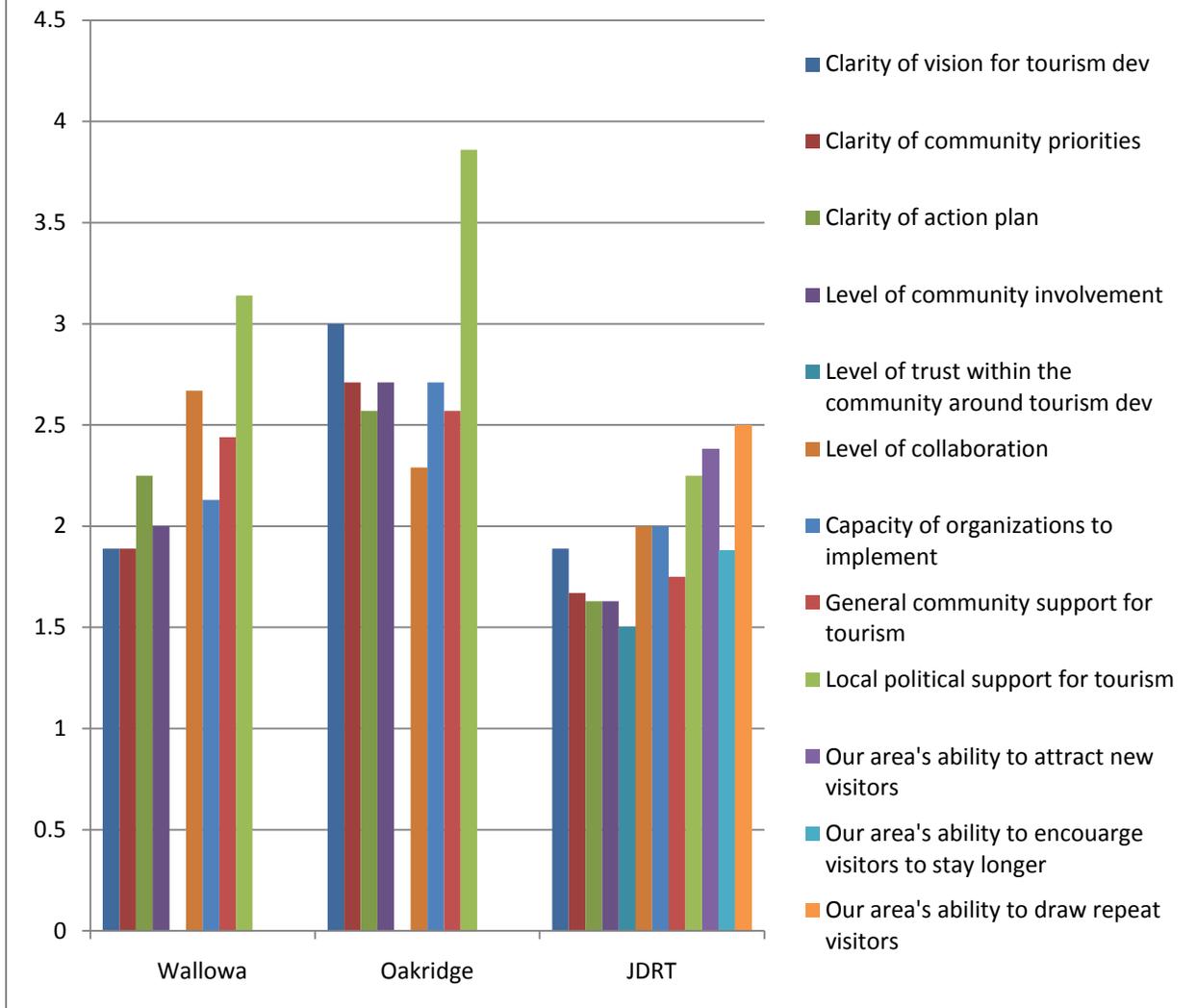


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “weak” and 5 being “strong”

These results reflect that four questions were added for the John Day River Territory survey that were not included for the prior two communities: the new questions relate to “level of trust within the community”, ability to attract new visitors, ability to encourage longer stays, and ability to draw repeat visitors.

Table C3d: % Change in Community Conditions for Tourism Development, by RTS Community

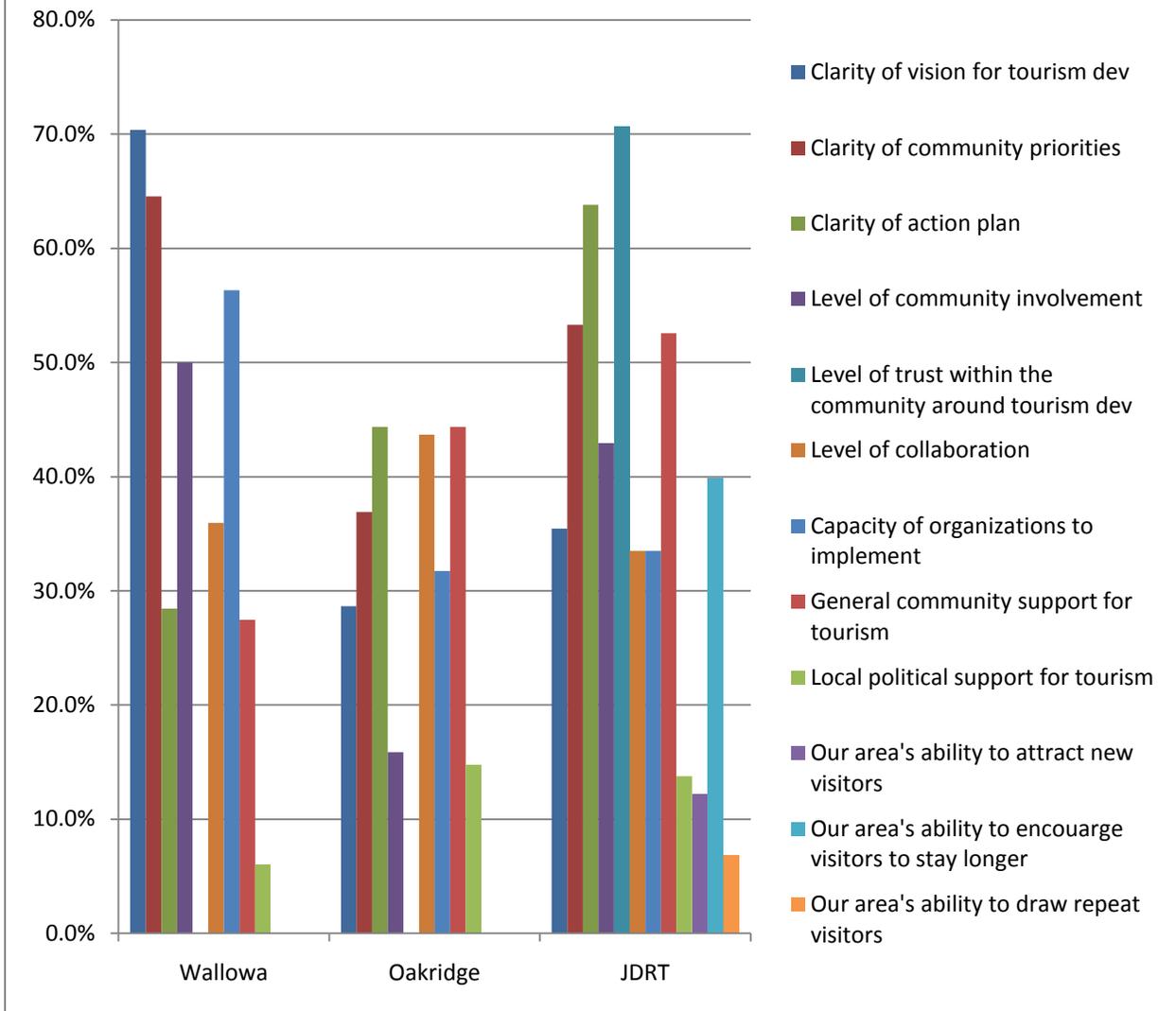


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “weak” and 5 being “strong”

These results also reflect that four questions were added for the John Day River Territory survey that were not included for the prior two communities: the new questions relate to “level of trust within the community”, ability to attract new visitors, ability to encourage longer stays, and ability to draw repeat visitors.