

# Wallowa County Rural Tourism Studio

## Six Month Progress Assessment

### February 2010

#### A1. Introduction

This report presents a preliminary assessment of progress during the first six months of the first community, Wallowa County, in the new Oregon Rural Tourism Studio (RTS) pilot program. As such, the program content, priority order of goals, evaluation criteria and evaluation methodology are all in flux. This assessment is intended to serve as a “developmental evaluation” resource, rather than as an indication of overall program success or failure.

In fact, the assessment has three goals: to learn what is working or not working in the Rural Tourism Studio pilot program; to identify opportunities for productive, timely follow-up as needed to improve the chances for positive outcomes in Wallowa County; and to develop a sustainable, efficient process for ongoing program evaluation as the program is implemented going forward. The three sections of this evaluation that follow the methodology description correspond to these three goals.

In Part B1, I compare the anticipated program activities and early outcomes as described in the Rural Tourism Studio logic model with what actually happened in Wallowa County. Personal interviews and an email survey show strong evidence that RTS has led to positive change on every measurable short term parameter in the logic model. The most often cited changes include a wider net of productive relationships, as well as more knowledge of what’s happening and what’s possible for the future of tourism in Wallowa County. Furthermore, respondents indicate lasting value from the Rural Tourism Studio program, and perceive positive causal linkages between the program and observed community change. The project has created tremendous good will for Travel Oregon among diverse stakeholders, and partners are moving forward with new implementation efforts based on what they learned and who they met in the RTS workshops.

In Part B2, I summarize direct Wallowa County RTS participant observations about needed or desired follow-up. This section also contains suggestions for future program design now that participants can look back at their experience. The most expressed needs are for follow up training, follow up assistance with tracking action team progress, and assistance with resource development for project implementation.

In Part B3, I recommend modifications in the evaluation process based on timing considerations, knowing more about what has been gathered locally, and what is available from secondary sources. Under separate cover, I have revised the baseline report template based on these recommendations and observations from the 2009 Oakridge RTS pilot.

## A2. Methodology

This report draws on four sources of information gathered between November 2009 and February 2010.

1. Survey monkey to all participants in workshops, regardless of how many sessions they attended- 12 responses (total sent = 60). 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 interviews with steering committee members and other key stakeholders as recommended by Travel Oregon. The Appendix includes a summary of key interview questions.
  - Jerry Hustafa, Wallowa Whitman National Forest
  - Sara Miller, Northeast Oregon Economic Development District
  - Troy Nave, Wallowa Resources
  - Vicki Searles, Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce
  - Gwen Trice, Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center
  - Alice Trindle, Eastern Oregon Visitors Association
  - Contacted, but did not receive response from Julie Mullen, Marya Nowakowski
3. Reviewed “Rural Tourism Studio Matching Grant Application from Wallowa County” for project descriptions.
4. Reviewed RTS documentation of products developed during workshops, including extensive notes from the first workshop, action planning notes from the last workshop, and interim workshop summaries as available for the agri-tourism and bike tourism workshops.

## B1. Activities and Outcomes: Logic Model vs. Actual Experience

**Immediate outcomes as per logic model:**

Formation of action teams to move ideas and projects forward	Workshop participants self-organized into five action teams at the final RTS workshop in May. Action teams: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Events (4 members)</li> <li>• Agri-Tourism (TBD membership: planned recruitment of people from agri-tourism development workshop)</li> <li>• Bike Tourism (5 members)</li> <li>• Cultural/Heritage Tourism (3 members)</li> <li>• Collaborative Marketing (3 members)</li> </ul>
Newer, more diverse mix of people involved with action teams	Approximately 25 core participants, and yes, there were new faces, according to interviews. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For bicycle tourism, the action team connects informally with an existing 12 member mountain biking club.</li> <li>• The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center attracted new supporters and gained new local visibility through the RTS project</li> <li>• The agri-tourism action team connects previously independent, nascent efforts</li> </ul>
New awareness and knowledge	Yes, this was cited in personal interviews, and also reflected in the electronic

of tourism development opportunities and resources	<p>survey results. See Table C-1a.</p> <p>Of all changes in the knowledge and motivation of participants, this item was ranked highest in terms of RTS's perceived causal effect.</p> <p>More interview comments about increased knowledge of state resources and technical experts; less about increased knowledge of local and regional players and their activities.</p>
New connections made across diverse sectors in the community	<p>Not sure of extent: respondents to personal interviews noted that more people were involved than before, both informally and formally.</p> <p>See notes in Section B3 on evaluation and better measurement of this item.</p>
Community in agreement on a vision for tourism in their area and critical next steps to move forward	<p>Yes, written vision and action plan are products of workshops.</p> <p>Email survey shows the biggest progress in this area (see Table C1b). However, in personal interviews, there was less clear recollection of strength of vision. This community experienced a large scale overall community visioning process in 2006: this did not have the same extensive vetting process.</p> <p>There is an action plan, and people appreciate the action orientation of this process.</p> <p>There are "interim goals" from the first workshop- unclear how these evolved or carried forward into current projects (e.g. one is to expand the tourism season for Wallowa County)</p>
Establish deeper relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	<p>Yes, great appreciation for Travel Oregon traveling out to Wallowa County</p> <p>Already good relationship between DMO and RDMO, though both are thinly staffed</p>

**Short term follow up activities as per logic model:**

Action teams meet, grow, make decisions on priorities, begin implementation	<p>At the final RTS workshop, participants formalized the following: action team names, focus projects, goals, members, next steps and next meetings. All teams were scheduled to meet between June 4 and July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2009.</p> <p>Implementation has begun</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chamber has recruited bloggers for its upgraded website</li> <li>• Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center- has achieved its 501 c3 status, close to acquiring old Forest Service bldg on site</li> <li>• Bicycle tourism project focus defined</li> </ul> <p>Action teams are meeting, no evidence they are growing yet</p>
Submittal of matching grant applications to Travel Oregon that reflect clear connections to goals of RTS	<p>Absolutely this was completed, and the document was a helpful resource for assessing implementation efforts to date.</p> <p>The Travel Oregon application was comprehensive and complex- required professional grant writer to tackle.</p>

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 <i>during</i> the RTS workshops.</p> <p>The only products that appear to have been further refined since the workshops are the projects and their associated timelines. This is evidenced in the Matching Grant application.</p>
Follow up assistance provided from Travel Oregon, Regional Destination marketing organizations (RDMO), and partners	Not sure what has been provided (no documentation) but respondents in personal interviews all indicated an interest in further contact, prodding and training. See Section B2 for specifics
Ongoing evaluation	<p>Yes: that is my scope!</p> <p>As noted in section B3, recommended modifications in the evaluation process could yield more precise and timely information.</p>

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

Visible synergy and momentum of action teams	<p>The action teams all meet separately and don't exchange formal updates, so respondents in the personal interviews did not have a good sense of overall momentum. People see their own piece.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bicycle and Marketing teams seem to have the most forward momentum based on phone interviews</li> <li>• The Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center project has momentum, but unclear if the cultural team is meeting formally</li> <li>• Agri-tourism Team is less active: major champion is out of county for half the year</li> <li>• Did not hear any update on Events Team and its level of activity</li> </ul>
New projects underway or progress on pre-existing projects	<p>Projects and relationship to prior efforts all documented in Matching Grant application. Projects have all developed increased focus and formality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agri-tourism is a new product, directly related to RTS workshops</li> <li>• Scope of bike tourism work expanded from "hard core" trail niche to broader pleasure riding. More diverse stakeholders and larger market potential.</li> <li>• Chamber use of social media marketing larger scale and more focused. Attributed to learning from RTS workshop</li> <li>• Maxville Heritage Interpretive Center project- this project was already underway with a passionate local champion. It is now more connected with other local tourism development efforts.</li> </ul>
Businesses are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	Not sure. Pending results of business survey. See section B3 re timing for this
Public and nonprofit support organizations are testing new tourism products and markets with some initial success	Wallowa Resources, which participated in RTS, is accelerating its work to develop eco-tours focused on bike and sustainable agriculture tourism

New partnerships and new resources for tourism development, including more integrated relationships between state and regional tourism development organizations and local players	Long list of partners integrated in Matching Grant application  See notes in Section B3 re: evaluation modifications
Increased integration of tourism planning with other community and regional planning, other community and regional stakeholders	The RTS project built on existing planning related to tourism development, especially the Rural Design Assistance Team (RDAT) 2006-07 plan. The RDAT report included many external consultant recommendations for strategy, but did not address implementation mechanisms: a number of its projects, however, especially agri-tourism, resurfaced through the RTS process and moved closer to implementation through RTS action planning.

## B2. Opportunities for Follow up and Course Adjustment

In general, participants were very pleased with the program. They understood it was a first-time pilot, and were very satisfied with the workshop content and the follow up momentum. Much of the immediate program feedback has already been captured in participant surveys after each workshop, and debriefings with the local steering committee and with the trainers. That work is well documented in Travel Oregon’s internal files, and was used to shape the Oakridge RTS pilot that followed. In particular, the Oakridge pilot benefited from clearer community outreach materials prior to the workshops, and from a clearer focus on business opportunities and trends.

There are some issues that became clearer as opportunities for improvement or follow up once some time had passed after the last RTS workshop.

### **Dissemination of final RTS products: Refine and distribute as early as possible**

The vision and strategies developed during the RTS workshops are not top-of-mind for participants six months later. In fact, I received different responses from interviews about whether a vision or strategy had been developed at all. It would be useful to distribute key documents to all participants, and to establish a web portal for the project as has been done to some extent with Oakridge.

### **Ongoing coordination of effort: Check in and nudge for momentum**

The RTS ended with the formation of several action teams focused on different projects. It does not appear that the stakeholders as a whole have continued to share information about their progress and potential opportunities for collaboration. As a result, no one has a good handle on the overall progress, nor can promote broad successes to build momentum. Several people noted that Travel Oregon could help by checking in pro-actively with action teams on their progress, requesting updates and offering assistance as possible, and by facilitating the exchange of updated information.

Also related to action teams, at least one action team has stalled, due to the main project champion being out of town for six months of the year. Travel Oregon may want to urge communities to recruit at least five people for each established action team so that capacity for action remains if a key person is not available.

Travel Oregon can further help the project sustain momentum by building more time into the RTS workshop format for local and regional players to *exchange* information about current activities and future plans. In future communities, the baseline assessment report will already be in place when the workshops begin. Reviewing and augmenting that information could build new knowledge and understanding about how to tap existing resources.

#### **Target stakeholders to engage: Find the draw that will work**

Three audiences proved somewhat difficult to engage. It is worth developing specific outreach strategies for them before, during and after the RTS workshops

- Lodging industry
- Sustained, diverse involvement of the business community
- Elected officials- see Table C-2 in the appendix. Respondents indicated that this was an important audience to engage, but that initial involvement was low and relatively unchanged by the RTS process.

#### **Project funding: Simplify the application, assist with other connections**

The Matching Grant application process should be clear at the outset of the RTS program in new communities so that participants can identify activities that “fit” as early as possible.

For future RTS communities, Travel Oregon may want to simplify the Matching Grant application by pre-qualifying participating communities that achieve certain benchmarks during the RTS process. The standard program application is laudable in its comprehensiveness, but it requires RTS communities to restate and reorganize much of what they have just completed through the workshops. Specific project information only could be the focus of the Matching Grant application.

With regard to other resources besides the Travel Oregon’s Matching Grant program, it’s extremely challenging to fund tourism project development in rural communities, including Wallowa County. The DMO and RDMO marketing organizations have limited staff capacity to expand efforts beyond marketing, and economic development organizations must work across many sectors. Travel Oregon could add great value by expanding its role as a project development funding resource or as an information clearinghouse for other tourism development funding resources.

#### **Follow up training and technical assistance: Formalize follow up**

Everyone interviewed was interested in a follow up convening and/or training hosted by Travel Oregon one year after the initial workshop series. It would serve several purposes:

- Define a clear timeframe for formally checking on progress, and making adaptations as needed

- Expand skills and knowledge; RTS follow up activities will build a wider audience for “Tourism 101” or other basic topics covered during the original RTS, and such topics could be repeated for newly involved stakeholders
- Enhance skills and knowledge of longer term RTS participants through advanced or specialized training.
- Renew the relationships between Travel Oregon, the DMO, the RDMO and other key partners
- Draw publicity to achievements

As a larger scale example of how to structuring a multi-year sector development effort with community based organizations, the Oregon Main Street Program offers a three stage, large scale comprehensive training and technical assistance program for downtown revitalization. This could provide insight for RTS as it grows.

### **B3. Evaluation Process Modifications**

The full program review and evaluation design modification is scheduled to occur later this spring. The following are immediate observations from the process of developing the Wallowa County Six Month Progress Assessment

- The email survey of program participants generated useful information about perceived changes in the community’s readiness for tourism, and about perceived causal effects linked to RTS. It is worth continuing with minor modifications:
  - Remove presenters from list of participants for purpose of follow up evaluation
  - Institute a modest prize drawing (e.g. a \$25 certificate to a local business) to increase participation in surveys)
- The original evaluation program design called for an email survey and follow up phone interview with a sample of local businesses, to take place annually, starting right after completion of the RTS workshops. Since the Wallowa County evaluation was started months after program completion, the timing of the business survey was too close to the general email survey to be practical.
  - In retrospect, it seems worth emailing a survey to a larger group of businesses on a semi-annual basis to get more generalizable results. A draft business survey will be provided under separate cover. Once we decide about how many businesses to include, I will implement the Wallowa County business survey.
  - Have local steering committee develop list of businesses with contact info, and contact them in advance to request their participation in the evaluation process. It is very inefficient to have the project evaluator develop and activate the business list.
- Wallowa County has no current visitor profile information. Some limited data is available for the seven county Eastern Oregon Region and for the Baker-Wallowa-Union county areas. This will likely be the case for other small RTS target areas as well. In order to get useful visitor profile information, Travel Oregon will need to provide a visitor profile survey tool that is easy and flexible to administer. A draft visitor profile survey will be provided under separate cover

- Travel Oregon should establish formal process to receive and disseminate updates from RTS action teams. It is inefficient to document implementation progress through stakeholder interviews, and better to use those interviews for questions beyond “what’s been done so far?”
- More precise questions are needed to establish the baseline degree of collaboration and interconnectedness of local organizations and key stakeholders; and then, to determine what, if anything, has changed. I’ve extrapolated my conclusions to date on this topic from stakeholder interviews, but these conclusions feel very subjective. In future communities, we should ask about the specifics of who works with whom, on what, how intensively, how productively, and then follow up with similar questions six months later.

### C1. Appendix- Electronic Survey Results

- 20% response rate: 12 survey respondents out of 60 who attended and had email address on record.
- 3 respondents were members of the RTS Project Steering Committee
- All respondents attended between five and seven of the 8 workshops or events associated with RTS
- The two workshops with the highest percentage of respondents attending were the community tourism planning workshop (the opening workshop) and the agri-tourism development workshop.
- The same two workshops drew the second and third highest total attendance (24 people each) for any of the RTS workshops or events. The evening pub talk with entrepreneurs drew the largest number of attendees (29).
- 4 of the twelve respondents are currently members of action committees. 6 responded that they were not participating on an action committee, and two respondents skipped this question.

**Table C1a: Please rate the following:**

	Pre-RTS (Mar 09)	6 months post-RTS (Dec 09)	% 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	2.73	4.00	+46.5%	3.91	4.00
Your knowledge of sustainable tourism development principles	2.27	3.73	+64.3%	3.73	3.73
Your level of involvement with tourism development in your community	3.00	4.00	+33.3%	3.90	4.00
Your awareness of assets and resources for tourism development	2.55	4.00	+56.9%	4.00	4.27
Effectiveness of your working relationships with other organizations working on tourism development	2.64	3.91	+48.1%	3.73	4.18
Your commitment to take specific action to tap tourism development opportunities in your community	3.10	4.10	+32.3%	3.70	4.00

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

**Table C1b: How strong are the following conditions related to tourism in your community?**

	Pre-RTS (Mar 09)	6 months post-RTS (Dec 09)	% 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	3.22	+70.4%	3.25	4.70
Clarity of community priorities for tourism development	1.89	3.11	+64.6%	3.50	4.60
Clarity of action plan for tourism development in your community	2.25	2.89	+28.4%	3.50	4.60
Level of community involvement in tourism development efforts	2.00	3.00	+50.0%	3.38	4.50
Level of collaboration for tourism development efforts	2.67	3.67	+37.5%	3.63	4.70
Capacity of organizations in your community to implement successful tourism development project	2.13	3.33	+56.3%	3.25	4.30
General community support for tourism as an economic development strategy	2.44	3.11	+27.5%	3.00	4.70
Local political support for tourism as an economic development strategy	3.14	3.33	+6.1%	2.88	4.50

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

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

Overview of sustainable tourism principles	3.33
Development of a community vision for tourism	3.33
Development of an asset inventory	3.67
Development of a tourism action plan	3.80
Information about bicycle tourism	4.56
Information about agri-tourism	4.25
Information about state tourism programs	4.40
Information about regional tourism programs	4.40
Information about event planning	4.67
Information about niche market opportunities	4.70
Training on marketing	4.20
Information about funding resources	4.00
Training on fund development	4.00
Training on collaboration and team building	4.00
Connections with others in my community	4.50
Connections with expert presenters	4.10
Connections with regional and statewide tourism development organizations	4.40

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

Given that Wallowa County had just submitted its Matching Grant Application to Travel Oregon soon before I interviewed key stakeholders, I was able to build interview questions upon information in that application. These questions will change for future RTS communities if there is not a similar recent summary of planned projects in place.

1. Tell me about how the four projects in the Matching Grant application evolved, from your perspective.
  - What are you most excited about in terms of each project?
  - Do you have any concerns about challenges that the projects will face?
  - What changes have you seen in these or other activities related to Wallowa County tourism development after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?
2. Overall,
  - What changes in relationships/collaboration have you seen in Wallowa County after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?
  - What changes do you see in the level of involvement in Wallowa County tourism development after RTS? Do you see a link between RTS and that change?
3. Is there anything you would change about the RTS program, now that you have the benefit of six months experience and hindsight?
4. Is there anything that Travel Oregon could do now to help you succeed?
5. Anything else you want me to pass on?