

Wallowa Bicycle Tourism:

THEME: Momentum for bicycle tourism is growing in Wallowa County with a range of projects related to road cycling, mountain biking and multi-use trail development. Together, these foundational activities are “getting the ball rolling for people to have quality cycling experiences” as a part of the diverse visitor activities that Wallowa County offers.

PROJECT IMPACT: The Ford Institute Leadership Program class, which had several members participating also in the Rural Tourism Studio, selected a bicycle rack installation as its class project. This resulted in 70 new bike racks located in Enterprise and Joseph RTS. The largest Rural Tourism Studio project was a Bicycling MapGuide and associated marketing of road bicycling opportunities throughout the county, which has made bicycling more visible and accessible for visitors. The intensified focus on bicycle tourism has built community and political support for integrating bicycle improvements on roadways. The Hurricane Creek Road, a back route between Joseph and Enterprise, is now being reconstructed with bike lanes, and bike lanes are also being added to Wallowa Lake Highway linking Joseph and the county park end of Wallowa Lake. A local hardware store which had a small bicycle shop set up within has been growing, and is in the process of buying a larger building for expansion. With all this activity, the community has won two major awards: the Oregon Economic Development Association’s 2012 Economic Development Award, and a 2010 National Association of Development Organizations Innovation Award.

PLACE: Wallowa County is located in the northeast corner of Oregon, abutting the states of Idaho and Washington. Located in the ancestral territory of the Nez Perce Indians, Wallowa County was settled by non-Indian pioneers starting in 1871. The total population (2013) of this rural county is 7,015 people.

Wallowa County is remote. The county seat of Enterprise is 71 miles from the nearest Interstate. The closest major airports are in Spokane WA and Boise ID, each approximately 4.5 hours away. Limited commercial air service is available in Pendleton, OR, Lewiston, ID and Walla Walla, WA, each approximately 2 hours away.

Wallowa County’s geographic remoteness is magnified by its rugged topography, which includes world-class recreational areas, including the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Wallowa Lake, and the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. These areas are managed through the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The wide Wallowa Valley is home to ranches, farms, and the county’s four incorporated communities.

The area’s economy has long been dependent on natural resource-based activities: agriculture/ranching are the single largest source of export-dependent employment (Oregon State Extension Service). The area was hard hit by the decline of the timber industry in the 1990s, and it still is more economically distressed than the state. Since the early 1990’s, tourism-related employment has grown.

STORY: Enterprise Mayor Dennis Sands recalls when he first saw Wallowa County. He was on a bicycle, as an out-of-towner participating in Cycle Oregon, climbing a steep incline on Route 39 between Halfway and Joseph when he finally arrived at the summit. As he looked down from the Hells Canyon Overlook at Wallowa Lake and the valley beyond rimmed by mountains, he felt a great sense of accomplishment mixed with awe. At that moment, he decided to make his home in Wallowa County.

The story of bicycle tourism in Wallowa County has similarly been a slow and steady uphill ride to build the infrastructure needed to support increased riding and visitation. The catalyst was similarly the Cycle Oregon event,

which has passed through Wallowa County six times, starting in 1995. Residents and businesses witnessed the positive energy and increased spending that resulted. In 2008, NEOEDD had received a Rural Business Enterprise Grant from USDA to develop bicycle tourism in Wallowa, Baker and Union Counties. This foundational grant was a key reason why Wallowa County was selected as the first pilot site for the new Rural Tourism Studio program. When the Wallowa Ford Institute Leadership Program (a diverse group with many non-bicyclists) later focused their energies on a bike-related project, this reflected growing “mainstream” awareness and support of bicycling.

Unlike in some other parts of the state, bicycling is not the main tourist draw here. Wallowa County has other established draws, including Wallowa Lake and the Tramway, river rafting, wilderness areas, and a variety of arts attractions. Brewery tours and motorcycle excursions are also increasingly popular. Bicycle tourism is one part of a menu of experiences that are being cultivated. Sara Miller of NEOEDD likens the strategy as one of “connecting the dots” for visitors as well as for locals working to expand tourism.

Just as important in shaping Wallowa County’s measured path to bicycle tourism is the area’s distinct culture: its strong sense of place and community pride, and its desire to foster tourism on its own terms. These values are evident in the 2006 Wallowa County Vision (that is still referenced), which emphasized aligning tourism with local values and appealing to visitors who shared these values. As such, it fits with Wallowa County to grow the sector with care.

In this context, bicycling has been gaining momentum as a legitimate tourism niche market through three strands of activity related to expanding its presence:

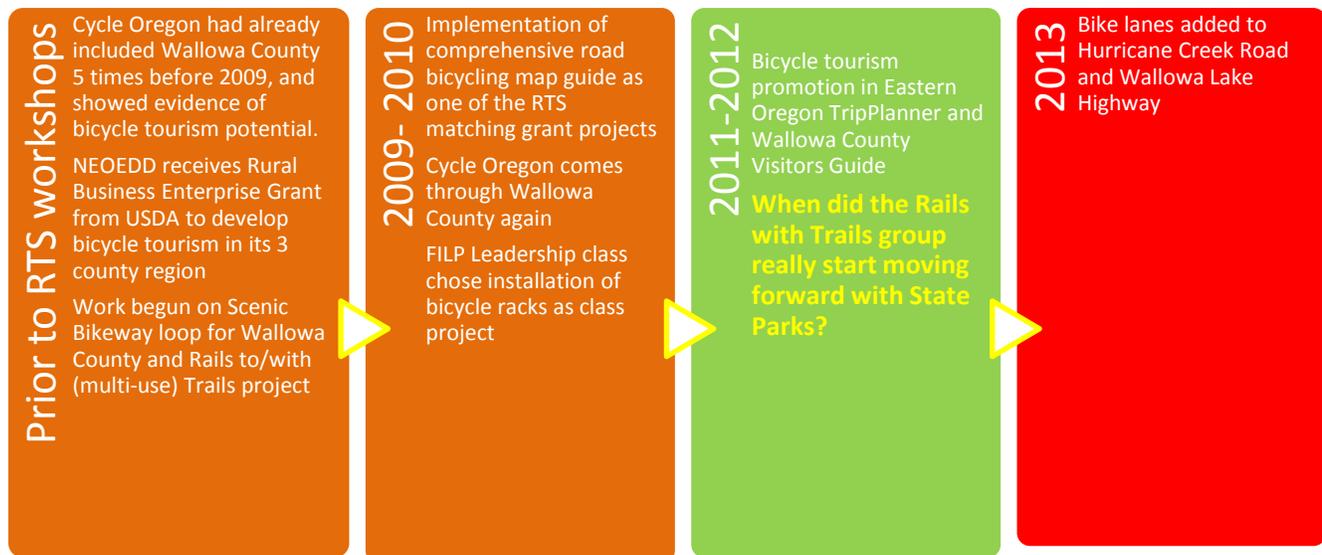
- Road bicycling, which is the main focus of the Rural Tourism Studio project. Along with the MapGuide product, road cycling advocates are working to establish an Oregon Scenic Bikeway loop in Wallowa County that connects with the existing Grande Tour Scenic Bikeway in LaGrande. Furthermore, thanks to effective advocacy, two key roads connecting Wallowa County communities are gaining marked bike lanes this summer.
- Mountain biking, with trails under development by the volunteer Nordic Ski team as they have time to do it. The mountain biking in Wallowa County is generally quite technical and extreme, and it is quite limited seasonally by the high elevations that are covered in snow. As a result, mountain biking is viewed as having limited potential as an economic driver, except if a recurring event could be established.
- Multi-use trails that include bicycling. There is an active Rails *With* Trails initiative that had stalled but now has taken the form of an active collaborating with Oregon State Parks and Recreation. Development of multi-use trails alongside the existing railway from Elgin to Joseph (preserving the rails for future freight and passenger use) would address some of the difficulties in securing a Scenic Bikeway designation, by providing safer alternate routes to narrow roads. The Rails with Trails project also includes plans for a separated multi-use path connecting Joseph with the state park at the end of Wallowa Lake.

While there was a bicycle tourism action team established as part of the Rural Tourism Studio process, the different strands of local work around bicycle tourism are only loosely connected in terms of who is involved. NEOEDD has been the common point of contact over time regardless of whether there have been funds in place for that role. Momentum has been somewhat compromised by the severe staffing cuts at the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest office, which otherwise would have been able to deploy its work crews for bicycle tourism related projects, such as trail repair and improved signage.

Much new infrastructure is now in place to support bicycling in Wallowa County. Local businesses may not yet be seeing major upticks in demand for their products and services, but it is important to remember this work started

right at the beginning of the recession. There is a sense of still untapped potential: for example, Mayor Sands notes that Wallowa Lake attracts 400,000 visitors a year, 80% of whom bring bicycles with them. So while the momentum feels fragile and projects await completion, there is also tremendous optimism that the work will generate long term sustainable benefits for the community and the economy.

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- It's important to engage people with a business interest in bicycle tourism as sparkplugs for activity. There was some of this in Wallowa County at the start of RTS, but the recession took a toll on their business models, and they did not sustain participation.
- Without one or more private sector sparkplugs engaged, it is critical to have a point person to convene and connect the players. NEOEDD did a great job with very limited resources, but there is a sense that more synergy could be achieved by increasing communication among the various bicycle tourism advocates and volunteers.
- Tie tourism development efforts with benefits for local residents (in this case, who also want to bike more) and align tourism efforts intentionally with community culture and values to build grassroots support.
- Don't assume that only bicyclists will want to support a bicycle tourism development effort. County GIS Planner Dawn Smith is not a bicyclist, but volunteered extra time well beyond the paid contract because the project was so fun
- For areas where bicycle tourism is not the main draw (unlike Oakridge, for example), it's critical to connect bicycle experiences with other visitor attractions. For example, the Hurricane Creek road bike lines will bring more bicyclists close to farms and ranches, so there is an opportunity to cross-promote.
- Building a new niche market does not happen overnight, and the journey can be long and arduous. Sharing information about what has been achieved and what is being planned helps to motivate action.

BUDGET:

The budget for the initial activities immediately following the Rural Tourism Studio was \$9,626 in cash and an additional \$3,880 in in-kind services. The Travel Oregon matching grant for implementation covered \$6,615.50 in expenses. The matching cash (\$3,010) was contributed by NEOEDD, Cycle Oregon, and the Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce.

Income	Cash	In-Kind	Total
Wallowa County Chamber of Commerce	\$ 200.00	\$ 360.00	\$ 560.00
NEOEDD	\$ 2,162.00		\$ 2,162.00
Cycle Oregon	\$ 648.24		\$ 648.24
Wallowa County GIS Department		\$ 2,700.00	\$ 2,700.00
Esprit Graphics		\$ 820.00	\$ 820.00
Travel Oregon Matching Grant	\$ 6,615.50		\$ 6,615.50
Total Income	\$ 9,625.74	\$ 3,880.00	\$ 13,505.74
Expenses			
Cycling web page on Chamber site		\$ 360.00	\$ 360.00
Base map layout and design	\$ 2,137.50	\$ 2,700.00	\$ 4,837.50
Printing- 5000 of 2 maps plus distribution	\$ 3,358.24	\$ 820.00	\$ 4,178.24
Promotion- Wallowa County Visitors Guide	\$ 650.00		\$ 650.00
Promotion- Eastern Oregon Trip Planner	\$ 1,240.00		\$ 1,240.00
Signage	\$ 2,240.00		\$ 2,240.00
Total Expenses	\$ 9,625.74	\$ 3,880.00	\$ 13,505.74

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Bicycle maps and photographs

CONTACTS:

Sara Miller, NEOEDD, 541-426-3598: saramiller@neoedd.org (how this ties with original county vision)

Liza Jane Nichols, Six Ranch, 6ranch@gmail.com (on why she supports rails with trails)

Jerry Hustafa, Forest Service, 541-426-5576, jhustafa@fs.fed.us (on what he sees as the potential for developing a system of bike routes, including rails with trails)

Dennis Sands, Enterprise Mayor, 541-432-7808 or 541-398-0572: meristem@hotmail.com (why biking is such a promising tourism asset in Wallowa County)