

Polk County Rural Tourism Studio
Six Month Progress Report
September 2015



RURAL TOURISM STUDIO

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A. Introduction

This report presents a progress assessment for the Rural Tourism Studio (RTS) program in Polk County, Oregon. The RTS program workshops commenced in September 2014, and wrapped up in January 2015. The information here reflects the status of activity six months *after* workshop completion, based on an electronic survey completed in August 2015. The e-survey focuses on determining what was most useful about the workshops; initial effectiveness of action teams; and planned tourism development activities for the coming year.

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. For respondents who were currently active on action teams, there were additional questions added to the e-survey.

According to survey respondents, 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.

KEY CONCLUSIONS:

The Polk County Rural Tourism Studio was offered in a more intensive format based on lessons learned with the Wild Rivers Coast region, including broad-based community outreach, visioning and asset inventories involving more people prior to the opening workshop, as well as coaching assistance immediately following the workshop. As a result, one might expect more robust and demonstrable results as implementation unfolds.

And in fact, the results do look quite different from past RTS communities, including Wild Rivers Coast at the same point in time after completion of the RTS workshops.

- For four of the six “personal engagement” factors and all of the “community condition” factors, this region has experienced the greatest positive change in any RTS community to date. Several “community condition factors” grew by more than 100%.
- The “after” rating for collaboration is higher 6 months after the Polk County RTS than in any past community.
- Connections with others (regional and statewide tourism partners, others in my community, and expert presenters) were highly rated as in past RTS communities as having lasting value. But for the first time, the marketing workshop, which has recently been revamped, was also rated very highly in terms of having “lasting value”.

Additional follow up interviews and assessment will be conducted in 2016, twelve to eighteen months after workshop completion, to better capture project implementation experience and progress relative to logic model indicators. The e-survey results suggest several specific areas for additional probing in interviews:

- What contributed to the large gains in collaboration? Was the mix of people initially involved a factor? What was the role of the community coach, a new program feature? How has this affected implementation?

- How has the vision and action plan served as a guide? Has the early emphasis on this made a difference?
- How have new people become involved? Does the higher number of early participants directly yield more robust action team for implementation?
- How has the training on marketing been used? Did it translate well to action planning?
- How have the positive changes from RTS affected the community's ability to move forward with implementation? Has the community involvement and collaboration been sustained? What has been done since the RTS ended to keep people engaged, and what yielded results?

B. Survey Findings

OVERVIEW OF RESPONDENTS

- 21% response rate: 13 survey respondents out of 61 who attended and had valid email address on record. This is a typical response rate for the RTS Six Month Progress Report.
- Four respondents are members of the original RTS Project Steering Committee, and seven of the respondents are currently participating on Action Teams.
- People with high levels of participation in the RTS workshop series are heavily represented among survey respondents. Four of the thirteen respondents attended at least 6 different RTS workshop events and received a certificate of completion as a result. These four people represent 57% of all RTS participants from this region who received certificates of completion (7 of 61).
- All segments of the Rural Tourism Studio program were well attended; each attracted an average of 27 participants, with a minimum of 20 people and a maximum of 38 (excluding the community networking event). For all participants, "Culinary and Agritourism" and "Bicycle Tourism" drew the largest participation, followed by "Teaming for Success." This is the first RTS community for two niche market topics were the most attended as compared with skill building topics. Participants who attended the bicycle tourism workshop are underrepresented in the responses. Among survey respondents, the highest participation was in the "Rural Tourism Marketing" and the "Teaming for Success" workshops, followed by "Culinary and Agritourism."
- Four of the thirteen respondents reported that they are currently members of action teams. This is typical of most other RTS communities, for which generally at least one half of respondents were active action team members at the same time interval after program completion.

PERSONAL ENGAGEMENT

Polk County's starting level of personal engagement shown in blue on Table B1 below is typical of past RTS communities. *All* of the indicators related to personal engagement in future tourism development improved (by between 35% and 68%) after the RTS workshops. The improvement is higher than past communities.

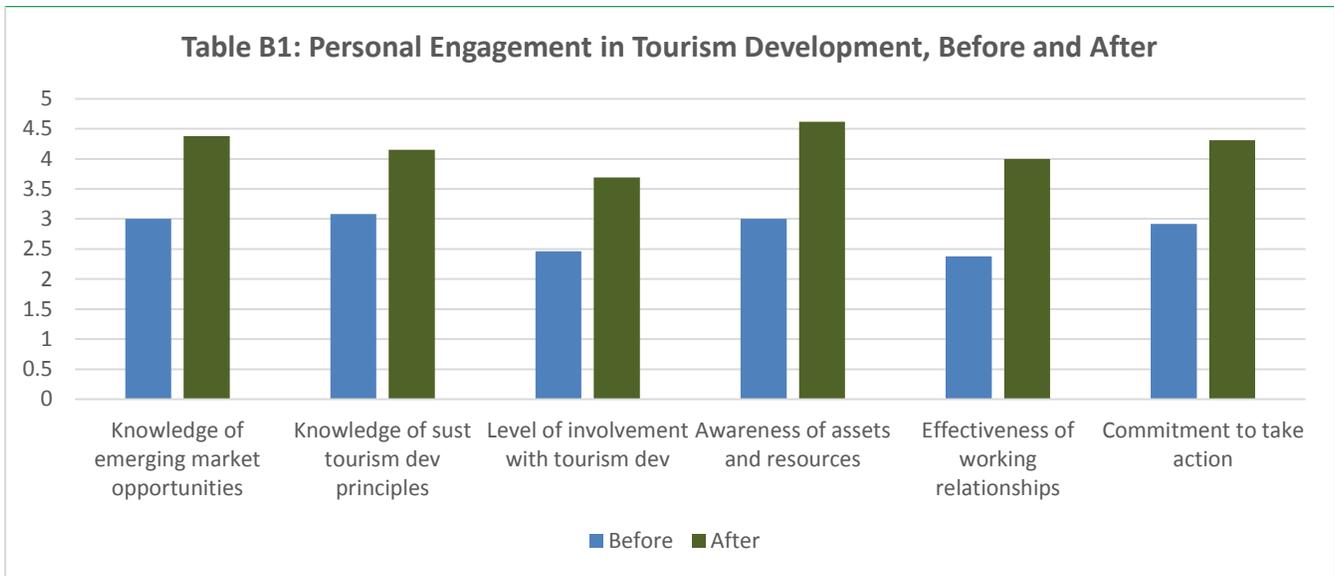


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “low” and 5 being “high”

The two factors that most changed align with where respondents most perceive RTS as having *caused* the change, as shown in Table B2 below.

- Level of involvement with tourism development
- Effectiveness of working relationships

Table B2: Change and Relative Impact of Personal Engagement Factors, in order of size of change, Polk County

	Before	After	% Change	Perceived impact of RTS on any changes noted	Importance of this factor in shaping future tourism
Level of involvement with tourism dev	2.38	4	68.1%	4.23	4.46
Effectiveness of working relationships	3	4.62	54.0%	4.31	4.54
Knowledge of sust tourism dev principles	2.46	3.69	50.0%	3.69	4.00
Commitment to take action	2.92	4.31	47.6%	4.15	4.15
Knowledge of emerging market opportunities	3	4.38	46.0%	4.46	4.38
Awareness of assets and resources	3.08	4.15	34.7%	4.00	4.15

In general, the reported changes are mostly above average for all RTS communities to date, as shown in Section C, Table 2. In particular, Polk County has the highest level of change to date in the following factors:

- Level of involvement with tourism development
- Awareness of assets and resources
- Effectiveness of working relationships
- Commitment to take action

COMMUNITY CONDITIONS:

In terms of their starting level of community conditions, Polk County respondents rated themselves somewhat lower, on average, than past RTS communities. All of the indicators related to community conditions for future tourism development improved positively (by between 35% and 150%) after the RTS workshops. See Tables B3 and B4 for detail. In terms of community conditions related to tourism, the four indicators (of 12) that changed the most were:

- Clarity of community vision for tourism development (+150% change)
- Clarity of action plan (+137%)
- Clarity of community priorities (+121%)
- Level of collaboration (+113%)

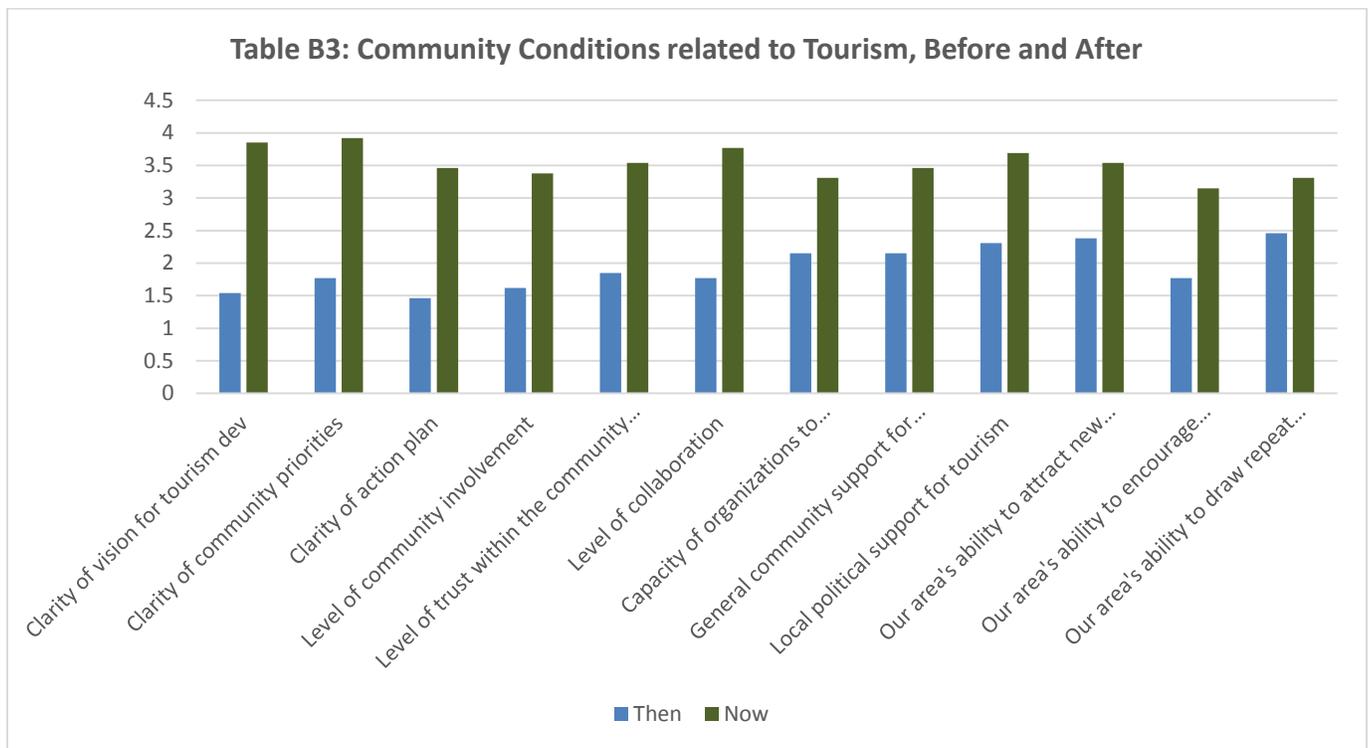


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “weak” and 5 being “strong”

In terms of the causal effect of RTS on community conditions, respondents indicate the top five areas of change noted above as the same five factors most influenced by the RTS program (Table B4 below).

Table B4: Change and Relative Impact of Community Condition Factors, in order of size of change, Polk County

	Before	After	% Change	Perceived impact of RTS on any changes noted	Importance of this factor in shaping future tourism
Clarity of vision for tourism dev	1.54	3.85	150.0%	4.38	4.62
Clarity of action plan	1.46	3.46	137.0%	4.23	4.77
Clarity of community priorities	1.77	3.92	121.5%	4.38	4.69
Level of collaboration	1.77	3.77	113.0%	4.46	4.92
Level of community involvement	1.62	3.38	108.6%	4.31	4.54
Level of trust within the community around tourism dev	1.85	3.54	91.4%	4.15	4.46
Our area's ability to encourage visitors to stay longer	1.77	3.15	78.0%	3.67	4.83
General community support for tourism	2.15	3.46	60.9%	3.92	4.46
Local political support for tourism	2.31	3.69	59.7%	4.00	4.69
Capacity of organizations to implement	2.15	3.31	54.0%	4.15	4.77
Our area's ability to attract new visitors	2.38	3.54	48.7%	4.08	4.77
Our area's ability to draw repeat visitors	2.46	3.31	34.6%	3.75	4.85

Compared with past RTS communities, Polk County respondents describe strikingly greater positive changes in community conditions across the board than any past community, as shown on Table C4.

LASTING VALUE

Consistent with results from past RTS communities, all program components are seen as having significantly lasting value, which is important to acknowledge! As shown on Table B5 that follows, “Connections with regional and statewide tourism development organizations” is viewed as having the greatest lasting impact. The “training on marketing” was ranked second in terms of lasting value: this is a much higher ranking than for past communities and may positively reflect the recent retooling of the marketing workshop.

Table B5: Polk County- What has had the most lasting value for you from the RTS workshops?

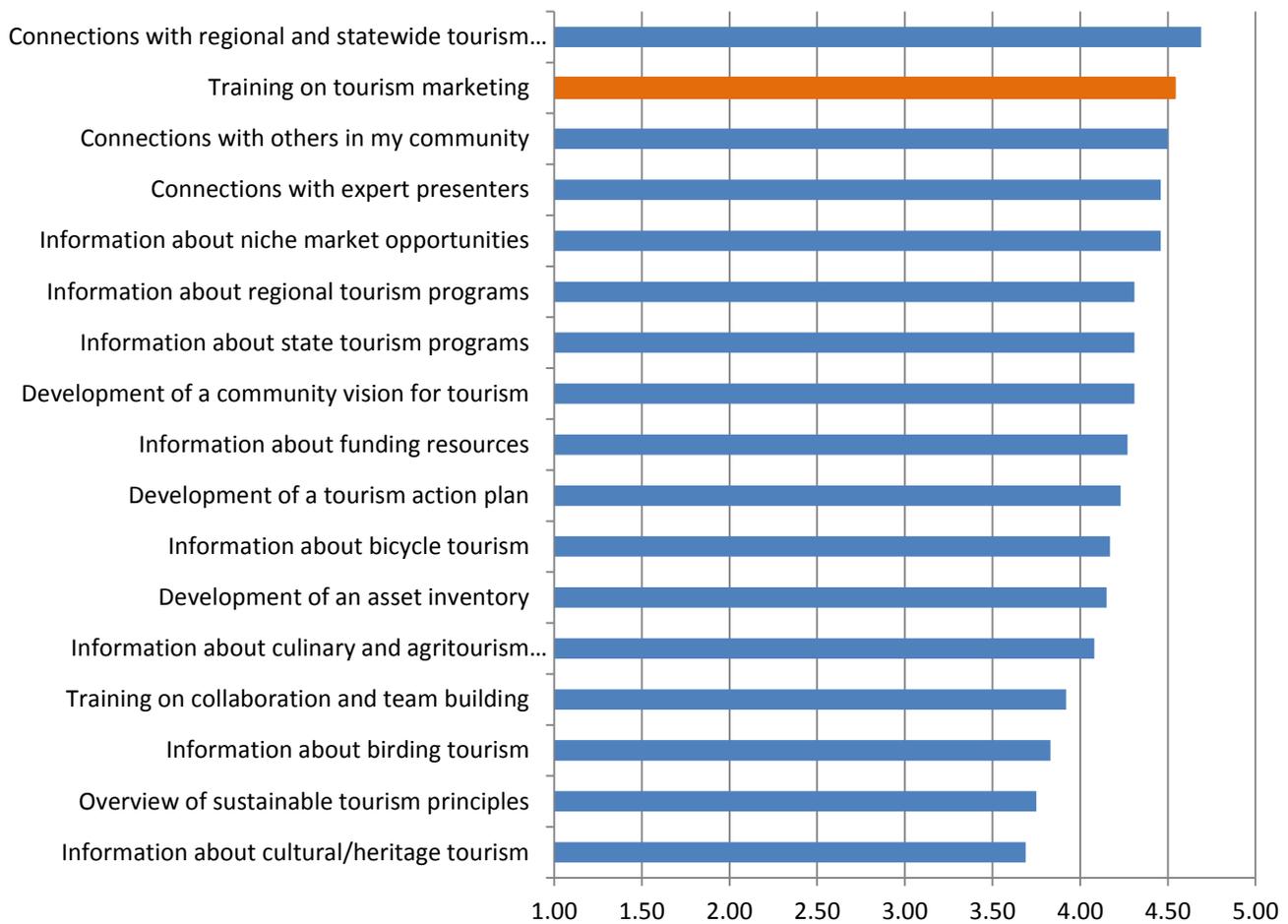


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “not useful” and 5 being “extremely useful”. Note that “information about bicycle tourism” was inadvertently omitted from the choices for survey respondents,

NARRATIVE RESPONSES ON NEXT STEPS

The narrative questions focused on key opportunities for tourism development and most important next steps to tap those opportunities, as well as key challenges facing tourism development and most important next steps to address.

The key opportunities cited multiple times include:

- Agritourism, culinary tourism, wine tourism
- Bicycle tourism
- Tapping Western Oregon University visitors and parents as target market

- Benefits from collaboration and continued community engagement

The key challenges cited multiple times include:

- Lack of overnight lodging
- Sustained and coordinated activity by community members and tourism businesses; “many of the people charged with tourism development wear multiple hats and have other responsibilities besides tourism; “many of the self-starters are already involved in other local efforts”

In terms of key next steps, even though Polk County respondents report much higher levels of collaboration and community involvement, there is still work to be done to sustain momentum. Several people mentioned the difficulty of keeping people engaged with action teams and implementation work (even with coaching and a clear action plan!): “You can only do so much with a bunch of volunteers.” Specific next steps cited include:

- Creating marketing materials
- Engaging other businesses
- Show progress to keep people interested in moving forward
- Build stronger ties with WOU
- Making time to coordinate and execute plans. “Winter should be good for this. We all tend to be too busy in growing season”
- “We started from nothing and I’m confident momentum will grow.”

C. Comparison across RTS Communities

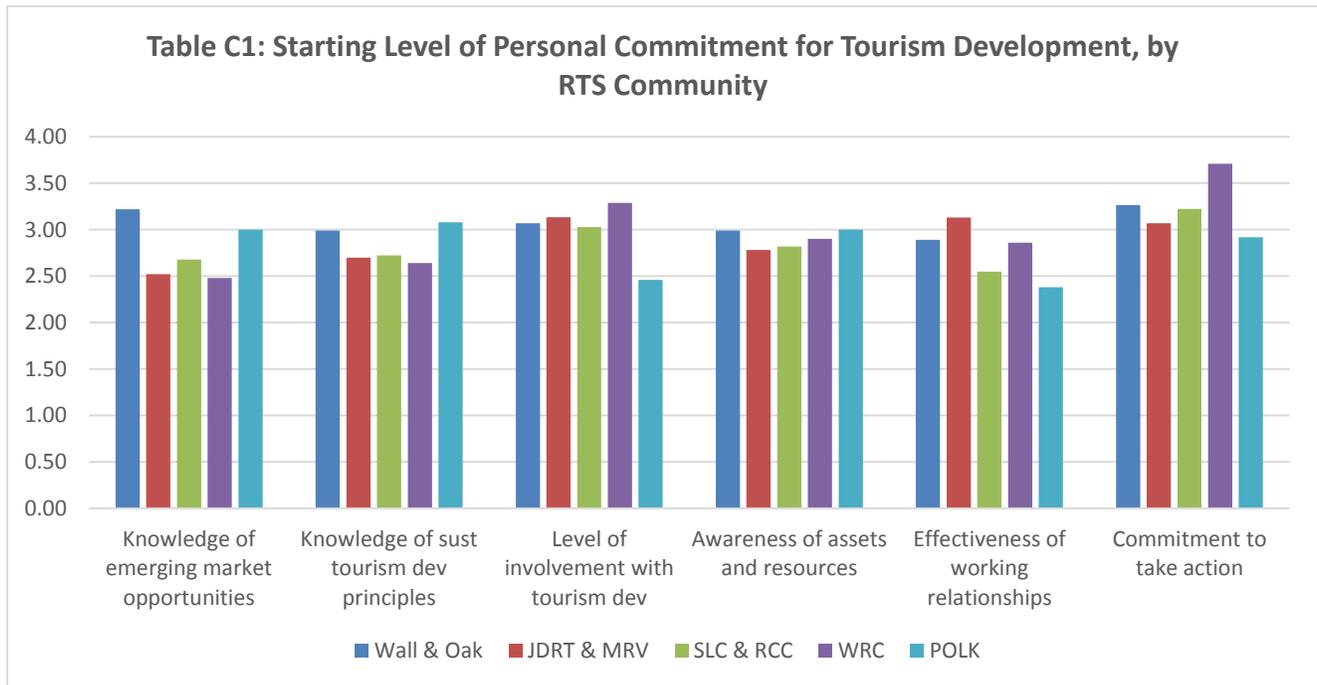


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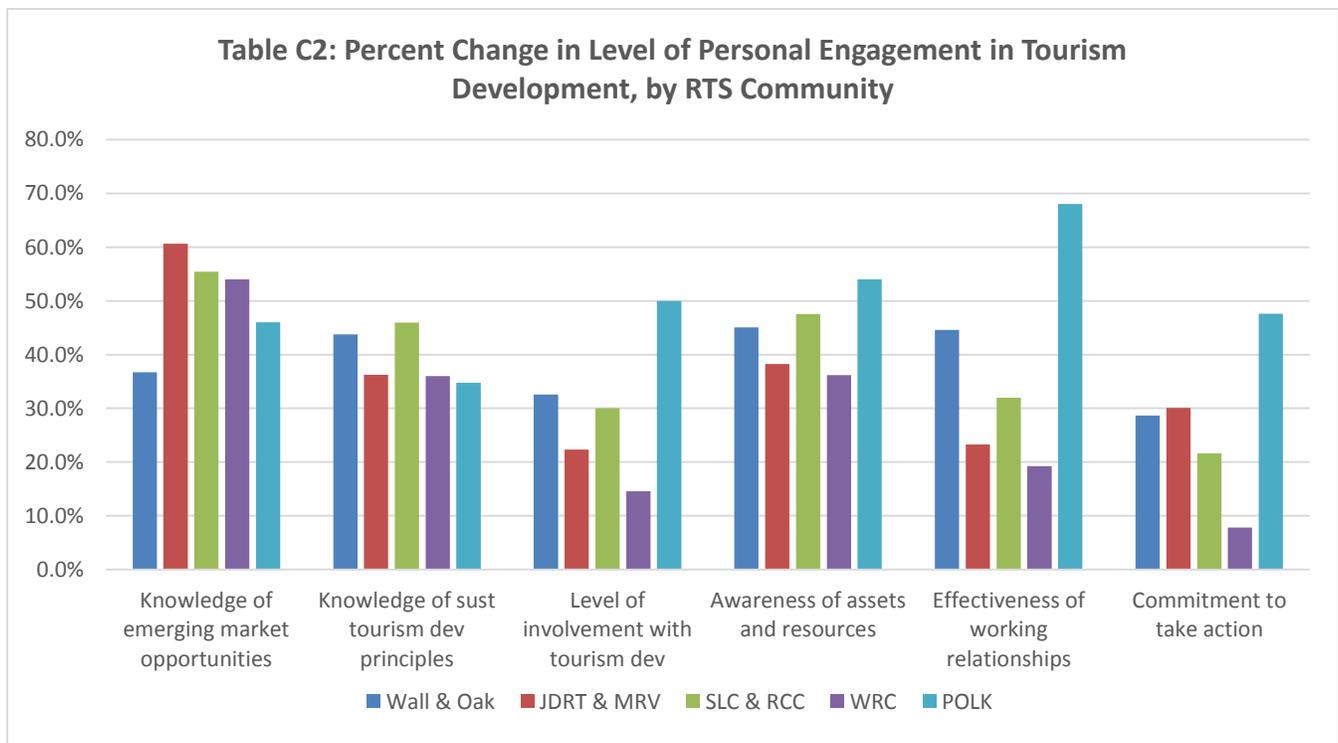


Table C3: Starting Level of Community Conditions for Tourism Development, by RTS Community

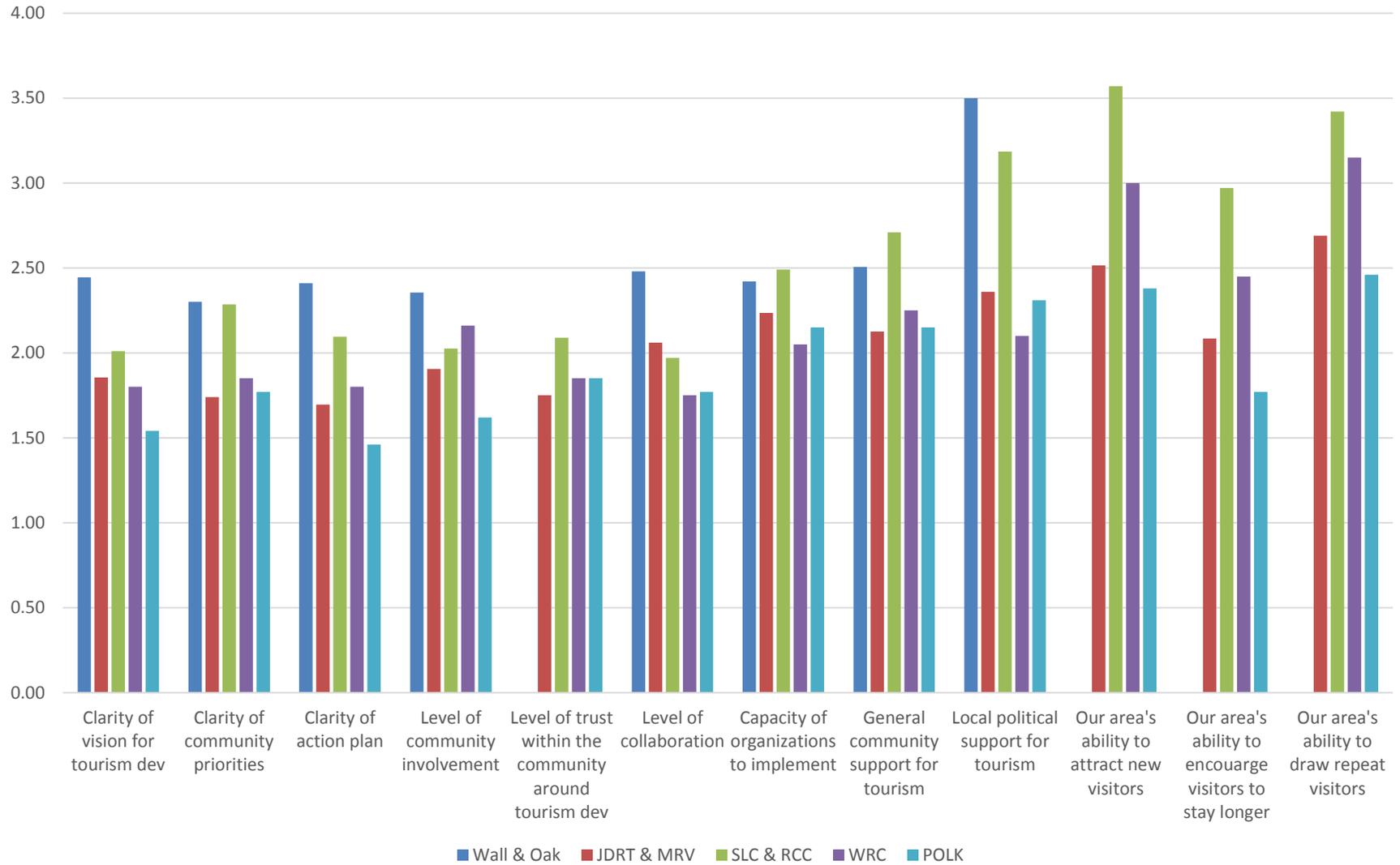


Table shows average scores, on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being “weak” and 5 being “strong”: Four categories were added to the survey after the first two communities were complete: “level of trust within the community around tourism development”, as well as the three market related questions “our area’s ability to...”. Thus, there are not comparative results for these changes across all RTS communities.

Table C4: Percent Change in Community Conditions for Tourism Development, by RTS Community

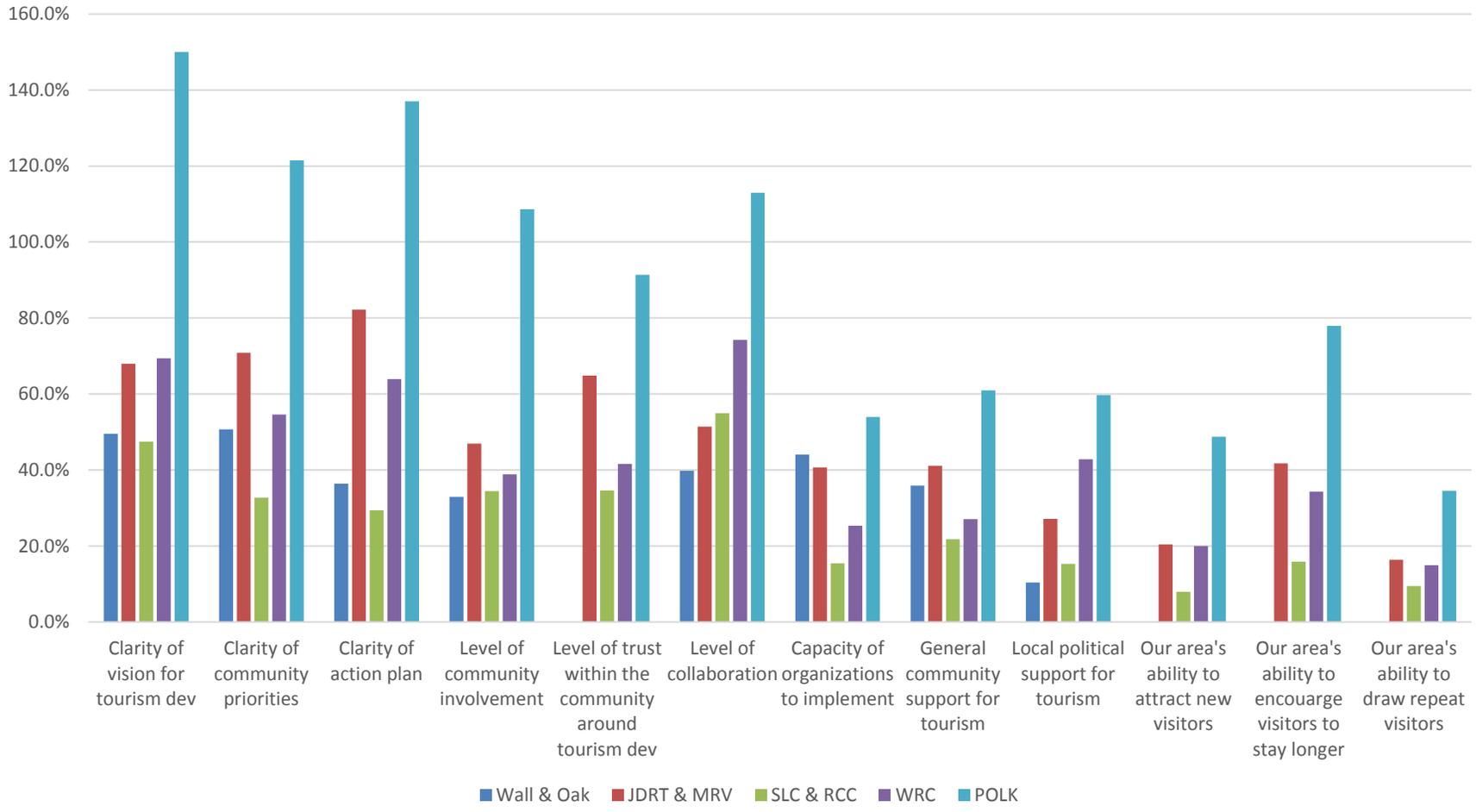


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