

Bicycle Tourism in Oakridge: Achieving Critical Mass

THEME: Through perseverance and creative partnerships, a struggling timber town reinvents itself as the Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest.

PROJECT IMPACT: New visitor draw, new business formation, new economic activity. A 2013 study estimates that the Mountain Bike Oregon event alone generates over \$1 million annually in visitor spending.

PLACE: Oakridge is located in eastern Lane County, in the western foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Together with neighboring Westfir, the area population is 4,100 people. The community is completely surrounded by the Willamette National Forest and its world-class natural assets and recreational areas, including Waldo Lake, Salt Creek Falls, and the Willamette Pass ski area. It is also located on a primary highway route from the Willamette Valley to Crater Lake National Park.

The area was hard hit by the decline of the timber industry in the 1980s and 1990s, and still is more economically distressed than the state or county. Over the past ten years, Oakridge has gained recognition as a premier mountain biking destination: the City has branded itself “Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest”.

STORY: For nearly a decade, the reputation of Oakridge as a mountain biking destination has been growing. Since 2010, promotion and trail development activities have accelerated and the community is now recognized by Bike magazine as one of the “America’s Five Best Mountain Biking Towns.” Several new businesses in Oakridge were established specifically to cater to cyclists. But this didn’t happen automatically. Several different related projects and creative partnerships focused on both planning and implementation converged to make the impact far greater than the sum of the individual parts. Now, Oakridge has inspired similar efforts in, and collaboration with, the nearby McKenzie River area.

Oakridge’s early efforts included securing a technical assistance grant in 2004 from the National Park Service’s River and Trails Conservation Assistance Program to develop an Oakridge-Westfir Community Trails Plan. This brought together many stakeholders to envision a well developed network of trails for hikers, bikers and equestrians that would capitalize on the area’s unique location. An early proponent of mountain biking in the area was Randy Dreiling, who launched the first “Mountain Bike Oregon” weekend event with a partner in 2005. That first year drew 34 attendees, but the following year, the event was a sellout with over 300 registrations. Since that time, the event has expanded to two different weekends, and has sold out both each year. Furthermore, a brewpub and guest house opened with the bicycling market specifically in mind.

Over the next few years, the Trails Plan was completed by a city appointed advisory committee that evolved into the Greater Oakridge Area Trail Stewards (or GOATS) organization to assist with implementation. This group has been instrumental in organizing volunteers to move many trail maintenance and expansion projects forward. The Eugene-based grassroots group, Disciples of Dirt has been a critical partner in connecting Oakridge with a wider network of volunteers and supporters. In 2008, the profile of mountain biking grew when the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) invited Oakridge to apply to join its new “Ride Center” network. This designation brought new technical expertise, partnership building and fundraising capacity to help

the community become the trailhead of a full-service bike friendly place to live and visit. Soon thereafter, GOATS evolved into a formal nonprofit 501(c)(3), and an IMBA local affiliate chapter, which was consistent with its mission.



Meanwhile, the City of Oakridge had engaged a consultant to develop a “brand” for its economic development program, resulting in the initial moniker “Oregon’s Center for Outdoor Recreation”. Subsequently, as part of the community’s growing work to tap tourism’s potential for the local economy, a “Visitor Readiness Assessment” was commissioned in 2008. Among many recommendations related to cycling, the report recommended a more direct connection between the community brand and its leading draw. Specifically, the recommendation was to brand Oakridge as the “Mountain Biking Capital of the Northwest”, and that label began to appear in some marketing information.

Oakridge was one of the two pilot Rural Tourism Studio communities. RTS workshops were delivered in the Fall of 2009, with the last session in January 2010. While key stakeholders were already working together around mountain biking, the RTS program raised broader community awareness about the significant economic development potential. As a participating motel owner recalled, “It was as if a light bulb suddenly lit up. I had no idea that bicycle tourism can generate so much positive impact for our community .And I already had everything in place; I just needed to market differently.”

Still, while the recreational assets were undeniable, there were issues to address to make the community truly a top notch bicycle-friendly destination. These issues included deteriorated conditions on some key trails, poor signage, lack of clear access points between the city center and the trail network, and more. The Ride Center work plan was based on the Community Trails Plan and aims to address these issues.

In 2010, the Ride Center received a \$400,000 federal earmark to implement the first phase of trail improvements. While this was a tremendous watershed moment, project leaders soon learned that working with federal grants, especially those originating through the U.S. Highway Administration, came with challenges. From negotiating interagency agreements to bidding processes and detailed engineering specifications for every built element, much more of the budget than anticipated went for pre-development work. As a result, a number of planned project components had to be dropped. To fill the gap, the community has had to leverage far more

volunteer labor from multiple groups (including GOATS, Disciples of Dirt, High Forest Cascade Volunteers, and the Catherine Freer Wilderness Therapy Program now known as New Vision Wilderness, West) than expected to construct and repair trails that were originally planned for professional trail builders. GOATS has also received an additional \$65,000 grant through the Federal Recreational Trails Program as administered by Oregon State Parks and Recreation.

All of the Ride Center work, funded by the earmark as supplemented by additional grant dollars and volunteers will be complete this summer, working over a period of about eight months. Main components include:

- Infrastructure: Trail construction and upgrades
 - Connect the last mile of National Forest trails to gateway trailheads along the community perimeters
 - Connections through the community and between gateways
- Installation of basic facilities such as bike racks, bike washes, information kiosks, shelters and benches.
- Trails website and brochures
- Signage/wayfinding to get the right users on right trails, and spread users over a greater trail network

Detailed project descriptions and budgets are included in the tools and resources.

The economic impact is still fragile, given that all this activity took place during a deep recession. But several businesses are expanding, and see bicycling as a key driver. For example, according to Ted Sobel of the Brewers Union, roughly three quarters of his business is bicycling related. There is apparently a pattern that holds true for many other bicycling-oriented communities: beer and bikes go together! The RTS workshops also surfaced interest in further promoting water-based recreation, and there is now a rafting company based in Oakridge. Several summer events in 2013 are planned for the newly completed Flat Creek Trail. It is also worth noting that IMBA will hold its 2013 Pacific Northwest Regional Summit in Oakridge in October, which will bring up to 150 visitors (and their associated spending and marketing influence) to the community.

The nearby McKenzie River area participated in the Rural Tourism Studio program in the Spring of 2011, with a strong emphasis on collaborating with and adapting lessons learned in Oakridge. To date, the two areas have worked together on bicycling events and are taking steps to secure Oregon State Scenic Bikeway designation for the Aufderheide Highway that connects them.

TIMELINE:



LESSONS:

- Perseverance is important. It takes a long time for a community to see itself as something different than it has been in the past. Positive, frequent opportunity for community education and dialogue is important. An important aspect of the “Ride Center” concept is sustaining and strengthening the *balance* between nature, recreation, community quality of life, and economic growth associated with tourism.
- Investment in planning and engaging stakeholders lays the groundwork for attracting volunteers, new resources and public support.
- Working with public money brings unanticipated project management and design costs. This is an especially rude awakening if the work to date has been primarily driven by volunteer energy. Important to budget for this. It is difficult to secure funds for trail maintenance and National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) compliance work.
- Engage fully in partnerships to make it work for all parties. Oakridge leaders found IMBA to be a flexible partner when asked, from accepting GOATS as a somewhat unusually structured affiliate organization to simplifying the designation process.

BUDGET: The bicycle tourism development effort extended across several organizations and several years. The original \$400,000 budget for the Ride Center is included in the tools/resources section.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Interagency agreement to establish Ride Center
- Visitor Readiness Assessment
- Oakridge-Westfir Community Trails Plan
- 2010, 2011 and 2013 Project Information fact sheets for National Bike Summits
- IMBA Ride center budget
- Project Brief: The Economic Impact of Mountain Bicycle Events in Oregon (February 2013)

TRAVEL OREGON CONNECTION: Several community members actively engaged in developing bicycle tourism participated in the Rural Tourism Studio workshops held between October 2009 and January 2010. Participants included small business owners, bicycling advocates, chamber of commerce and city officials.

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