

# John Day River Territory: Old West Scenic Bikeway

**THEME:** One of the state's first scenic bikeways serves as a conduit for tangible economic development in communities along the route. Based on the uniqueness of its particular location and topography, the area is now building upon the scenic bikeway as an anchor tourism draw for a much wider range of bicycling activity.

## **PROJECT IMPACT:**

The scenic bikeway has created entrepreneurial opportunity all along this remote route, and established a new tourism product that attracts visitors to Grant County.

- Significant uptick in business all along the route due to new riders in the area
- New bicycle support businesses established or expanded: bike stand/repair station, bike shuttle service, supported tour company, bike shop, and hostels.
- Through the "Two Wheels Spoken Here" initiative, this region piloted what has become a statewide "Bike-friendly Business" certification program to educate businesses on how to connect with cycling market, and expand the availability of critical goods and services for cyclists.
- Scenic bikeway as catalyst for broader bicycle tourism strategy, including side routes to encourage longer visits and great economic impact.

## **PLACE:**

The Old West Scenic Bikeway is located in Grant County, the southeastern half of the John Day River Territory region. Located in the north-central part of Oregon, the four-county John Day River Territory includes Sherman, Gilliam, Wheeler and Grant counties. This is sparsely populated country. The total population (2012) of this rural region is 12,426 people across 8,272 miles. 59% of the region's population lives in Grant County.

State Highway 26 is the primary east-west route for the southern part of the region. Federal Highway 97 carries north south traffic in the western part of the region. Other north-south routes are secondary, often very winding highways. The closest major airports are in Portland, OR and Boise ID, 2.5 to 4 hours away depending on starting location.

While the region shares many characteristics in terms of architecture, history and population density, the topography is varied. Gilliam and Sherman County are primarily open rolling terrain cut through by steep river canyons. Sherman County has the state's greatest percentage of land under agricultural cultivation. Wheeler and Grant County's terrain is more varied and rugged, including parts of two national forests (Ochoco and Umatilla) and internationally known geological features such as The John Day Fossil Beds and the Painted Hills. The John Day and Deschutes Rivers in the region are nationally designated wild and scenic rivers.

The area's economy has long been dependent on natural resource-based activities and it is subject to swings in agricultural commodity prices, especially for wheat and barley. Ranching and forestry are also important sectors in Grant County, which comprises over half of the region's land mass. Throughout the region, there has been a concerted effort to expand marketing and develop new tourism products that highlight cultural/heritage resources, outdoor recreational opportunities, and agri-tourism. Tourism is still a relatively small part of the regional economy, with the most visitor product currently centered on Grant County.

## **STORY:**

The Old West Scenic Bikeway, a 174.4 mile loop route, was among the first state-designated Oregon Scenic Bikeways. The initial organizing work to identify a safe and scenic route culminated in 2011 with formal designation. But the real work to build the public and business infrastructure to attract and support bicyclists actually traveling the bikeway shifted into full gear with the launch of a Bicycle Tourism Studio (BTS), a new Travel Oregon sponsored technical assistance program. Drawing from the format of Travel Oregon's broader Rural Tourism Studio program, the purpose of the BTS was to raise awareness of the market potential for bicycle tourism as an economic development tool, and to stimulate new business formation along the route to serve that market.

The day-long BTS working session was held in May 2012. Local volunteer Mike Cosgrove, an active proponent of the the Scenic Bikeway designation process, played a lead role in community outreach prior to the event. Knowing that local communities and businesses were already familiar with the positive economic spinoff from motorcycle tourists along the route, he framed his recruitment pitch as "how to earn money from cycling". He pointed out the bikeway's overlapping sections with an existing and well-traveled draw, the TransAmerica Bicycling Trail. He met one-on-one with "community leaders, cycling buddies and small independent businesses" to recruit participants.

This outreach yielded 50 attendees, the majority of whom represented businesses or potential businesses. "Due to the quality and diversity of the presenters, people stayed", said Mike, and they organized several action teams to advance priority projects by the end of the day.

The first working group focused on business outreach, specifically to engage local businesses in promoting their bicycling related services. The result was a "Two Wheels Spoken Here" bicycling ambassador program adapted from the Rural Tourism Studio programs "We Speak" initiative that has enrolled approximately thirty businesses to date. Participating businesses attend Travel Oregon's Q-Care customer service training, review a list of goods and services needed by bicyclists, and commit to providing at least one such service. They receive window decals, metal signs and promotion to connect with bicycle tourists. This local initiative has been picked up by Travel as a statewide "Bike-friendly Business" certification program.

A second action team focused on creating a brochure showing side routes off the main Scenic Bikeway, giving people a reason to stay longer in the area. This complements the state produced Scenic Bikeway maps. The initial print run of 5000 brochures, produced with funding support from the Grant County Chamber of Commerce, has been fully distributed. Other action teams formed around creating a shuttle service, bicycle information kiosks, events and a geological interpretive brochure for the bikeway.

Through ramped up marketing, the community was able to land itself on the CycleOregon 2013 itinerary, and will host a smaller group ride organized by Bend-based Bicycle Rides Northwest in 2014. This has proven to be a beneficial substitute for the original idea of the community organizing its own events.

Beyond events, a team of local businesses and bicycling advocates from throughout Eastern Oregon attended the Seattle Bicycle Expo to promote the region's three Scenic Bikeways. Eastern Oregon Visitors Association, the regional destination marketing organization (RDMO) as well as the local chamber provided funding support for the booth and travel expenses. Finally, the Old West Scenic Bikeway is featured in marketing for the four-county John Day River Territory region as one of its recommended itineraries. As a project of the JDRT Rural Tourism Studio program also offered by Travel Oregon, the series of self-guided itineraries is in production as of October 2013.

Stimulated by the Scenic Bikeway designation and the Bicycle Tourism Studio, a number of businesses have opened or expanded to provide goods or services for bicyclists. They include:

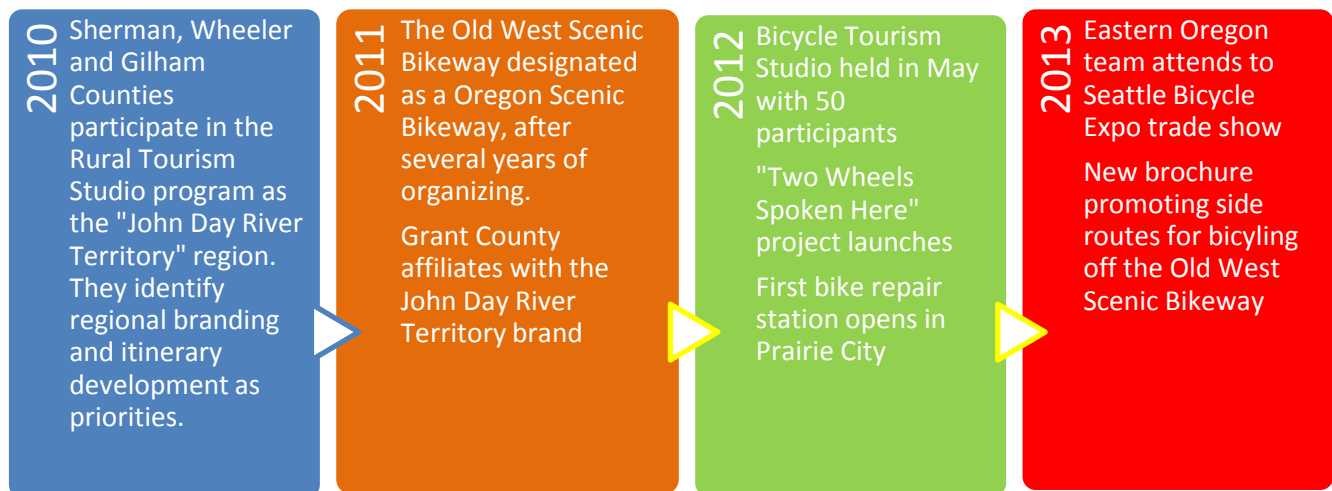
- Expansion of a bike hostel and addition of supported bike tours in Mount Vernon
- Another bike hostel starting up in Prairie City
- A bike hostel in Monument with a garden open to guests for self-serve meal ingredients
- A new brewpub, the 1188 Brewery in John Day
- A self-service bike repair station inside Roan Coffee Company in Prairie City,
- Increased sales from bicycle tourism at an existing café in Dayville during the four month bicycling season are contributing to sustaining the business year-round.

A number of additional projects are under development including:

- Establishing a network of bike repair stations around the 174 mile bikeway modeled on the first one (noted above) which was launched in 2012
- Working on expanding access to/signage for water especially on the more remote segments of the Bikeway through enrolling more businesses and landowners in the “Two Wheels Spoken Here” program.
- Working with Travel Oregon to increase bicycle safety education for community members as part of a opening cycling to less experienced people
- Exploring the potential for expanding the bicycling season by opening up the 831 mile network of gravel forest service roads to fat tire riding. The National Forest’s gravel roads are already groomed in the wintertime for snowmobiling, so biking is possible with snow on the ground. Just as Oakridge has a clear specialty around mountain biking, Mike Cosgrove aspires to be the “Oakridge of gravel biking” with varied terrain as the unique drawing card for traveling to Grant County for a multi-day bicycling experience.

Bicycle tourism continues to grow in Grant County. According to Mike Cosgrove, the Bicycle Tourism Studio “gave all of us the confidence that this was what we as a community wanted to do. We are in a unique environment, and bicycle tourism is a great opportunity for us.”

## TIMELINE



## LESSONS LEARNED:

- One-on-one outreach, and strong market information, is key to getting businesses engaged and involved.
- A small community can take a short cut to economic development benefits from events by partnering with event organizers rather than trying to do it all alone. This seems obvious, but it bears reminding nevertheless.
- The case of the Old West Scenic Bikeway is not typical in terms of the person power needed to launch and sustain the effort. While a goal of the Scenic Bikeway program is to have a formal steering committee with

representatives of each community along the route, that committee has not materialized. Rather, a single champion, Mike Cosgrove, has donated hundreds of hours of time (by his estimate), thousands of miles of driving, as well as other resources to launch the effort over a five year period. The local Chamber of Commerce has also been an active partner. With more people, the timeframe could be compressed to two years, Mike estimates.

- In small communities, many of the business opportunities are small-scale: not enough to stand alone as a business, but workable and beneficial as an add-on activity for an existing business or a purposefully “cottage-scale” enterprise, at least for a few years.

## BUDGET:

While much of the work was done through volunteer and in-kind services, main budget items were as follows:

<b>Income</b>	Cash
Grant County Transient Room Tax via Grant County Chamber of Commerce for brochure	\$ 350
Eastern Oregon Visitors Association for Bicycle Expo booth	\$ 450
Part EOVA, part Chamber of Commerce (estimated travel costs)	\$ 600
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$1,400</b>
<b>Expenses</b>	
Decals and metal signs for the “Two Wheels Spoken Here” program. Purchased by Mike Cosgrove and sold with a small markup to Chamber members, a slightly larger markup for non-members. Prices ranged from \$18 for a window decal to \$35 for a two sided metal sign. A small number of extra signs were distributed for free (covered by the markup) to tiny businesses or non-commercial participants (e.g. a ranch that would make water available to cyclists). The net cost was 0.	\$ 0
Develop and print 5,000 bicycling brochure for side routes off the Old West Scenic Bikeway, produced by Eloise Boren (ER Printing and Graphics, LLC), with maps provided by the North Fork John Day Watershed Council/Grant County Economic Council)	\$ 350
Booth at the Seattle Bicycle Expo,	\$ 450
Estimated travel costs for Seattle Bicycle Expo	\$ 600
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$1,400</b>

## TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Bike Friendly Business program information about key services needed by cyclists. This statewide resource is based on the early local work done through the Two Wheels Spoken Here in this region.
- Brochure for side routes off the main Old West Scenic Bikeway
- Itineraries developed as part of the John Day River Territory Rural Tourism Studio are not yet printed as of October 2013, but will be available in the future.

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