

McKenzie Bicentennial Event: Catalyst for Regional Collaboration

THEME: A volunteer driven community event leads to resurgence of the local Chamber of Commerce, and serves as the springboard for building strong regional collaboration for tourism.

PROJECT IMPACT: New capacity to organize events; stronger Chamber of Commerce, more events now planned collaboratively across region. New product for visitors: expansion of destination draw from primarily outdoor recreation to include a culture/heritage component. New infrastructure: Mobile Museum as a permanent asset/draw in a form that uniquely fits this linear chain of communities.

PLACE: The McKenzie River Valley is located in eastern Lane County, in the western foothills of the Cascade Mountains. It includes a number of small unincorporated communities along the river that lie between mileposts 10 and 60 of Oregon Highway 126; including Walterville (Cedar Flats area), Leaburg, Vida, Blue River and McKenzie Bridge. This highway is a major east west route between metropolitan Eugene/Springfield and Central Oregon, a major tourism destination.

The first non-Indian settlers came to the area for fur-trapping, farming and mining along what was a wagon trail traversing the Cascades. By the early 20th century, with the advent of automobiles, the McKenzie River Valley became a significant tourism destination related to fishing and guiding. Reflecting the presence of this activity, several river guides established the McKenzie River Guides Association in 1931. Many residents and guiding businesses have been in the region for multiple generations.

STORY: The idea for the McKenzie Bicentennial Event began in the Spring of 2011 when Margaret Beilharz, a retired Forest Service employee who had recently returned to the area, started to research the history of her homesite in Blue River. As she poured through the Jerry Williams papers at the Oregon State University Archives, she came across a book about Donald McKenzie, the first pioneer settler of the McKenzie River area. When she noticed that he arrived in 1812, she thought a Bicentennial event would be a perfect way to maintain and collect the history of the area while increasing its visibility for tourists.

She brought up the idea in several venues, including the Rural Tourism Studio workshop on Cultural/Heritage Tourism, and at the Chamber of Commerce. After several months of persistent advocacy, the project finally emerged as a priority of both the Rural Tourism Studio for funding and implementation. Margaret and fellow Chamber member Judy Casad recruited a committee of eight people under the auspices of the Chamber of Commerce, who worked to organize the venture. Planning began in earnest in the autumn of 2011 toward a May 20, 2012 target date. The Blue River Community Development Corporation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, agreed to serve as the fiscal agent for project funding. Grants were awarded by Oregon Tourism Commission, Lane County Historical Society, McKenzie Chamber of Commerce, Eugene Water and Electric Board, local businesses and individuals.

The Bicentennial (see attached program schedule) included a series of coordinated events in several locations. The McKenzie Community Track and Field, also a 501(c)(3) located in Blue River, agreed to serve as the main site for the “Spring Day” event which recognized Donald Mackenzie’s exploration of the area in the spring of 1812. . A display describing Mackenzie’s explorations was incorporated into the Mobile Museum described below. .

Throughout the year, the Mobile Museum was made available up at many community events up and down the valley. The Mobile Museum booth is not fancy: it is a collapsible 10 x 10 foot booth, with banners and displays including a large map depicting Mackenzie’s travels and history, notebooks of photographs of local historic landmarks, Native American artifacts, and material marketing local products. Volunteers staffing the booth also reached out to long-term residents who might have additional artifacts to display, with an eye toward expanding traveling exhibits that all communities along the river can share.



It’s important to note that when the Bicentennial was first proposed, the Chamber of Commerce was struggling with low membership and leadership transitions. Confidence was low that it could ever recover. The Bicentennial event provided a highly visible focus for members to work together with a defined goal and deadline. The Rural Tourism Studio workshop teams evolved into a “Tourism Committee” of the Chamber of Commerce. The Bicentennial events were the first success of this new Committee.

While an estimated 750 people participated in the main McKenzie Bicentennial Event, it was not a huge draw for visitors from outside Lane County. The majority of attendees were local, with up to 40% being from the nearby Eugene-Springfield metropolitan area. But organizing it successfully generated positive exposure for the communities in the region, and built new relationships and pride among local residents and businesses that bode well for future tourism development.

As a result of these new connections, the Chamber’s Tourism Committee decided to organize shared promotional/destination development themes in future years, with the goal of identifying something unique and compelling each year. Around the annual theme, the area will intentionally connect various events into a critical mass of visitor draws. For example, in 2013, two Art festivals are scheduled for the same weekend, on purpose.

For 2013, it is the 150th anniversary of gold being first discovered in the region. The area’s demonstrated capacity to pull off a successful event series attracted the interest of Travel Lane County, which was seeking to engage with a pilot area to develop geo-caching as a regional attraction. The McKenzie area will be the first such pilot area (with Florence as the second). Gold will be integrated into what is found at the cache sites. For 2014, the tentative theme is the history of the McKenzie Highway.

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- Having a base of leaders from the Ford Institute Leadership program which ran concurrently with the Rural Tourism Studio program was a great asset for implementation. To overcome turf and personality issues, the workshops, classes and follow up meetings offered allowed for conveners viewed as “neutral” to help draw the community together. Project advocates actively connected with leaders across organizations to generate a critical mass of energy.
- Even when the will is there, it can be challenging to form new partnerships. For example, the Track and Field had never hosted an event where it wasn’t the prime sponsor. This created issues around insurance coverage and need for clarity around what activities could be conducted where on the site. Fortunately, all partners worked to figure things out. Allow extra time to work through such issues.
- There is still work to be done to build strong regional collaboration. Some long time businesses with an established clientele were not interested in working together to further grow their businesses, even though their products and services were essential elements of the area’s overall tourism draw.
- The mobile museum concept is a creative, low cost way to develop a shared asset for visitors and residents alike. It’s more than a traveling exhibit, in that it can be set up anywhere, not just in a building.
- The Destination Marketing Organization (in this case, Travel Lane County) can not only assist in marketing individual businesses and local events. It can also actively develop new attractions for the area (in this case, geo-caching) when there is local capacity to partner.
- Facebook promotion for the Bicentennial Event drew significant interest from young people. It was originally in the form of a Facebook page for Donald McKenzie, until it was learned that Facebook accounts are not permitted for historic figures, only living people.

BUDGET:

Between December and April, the project received \$17,000 in direct financial support. The Blue River Community Development Corporation served as fiscal agent.

Amount	Source	Use
\$4,900	Travel Oregon RTS grant	Spring Day advertising, event staging, musicians, porta-potties, insurance
\$1,800	Lane County Rural Tourism Marketing Funds (through McKenzie Chamber of Commerce)	Marketing
\$4,000	EWEB	Mobile Museum
\$4,500	Lane County Historical Society	Logo, recording and managing oral histories
\$1,450	Business contributions (private donors, Lane Electric Coop)	General event support

In terms of other in-kind support, The US Forest Service provided in-kind graphic arts assistance. the project champion who spearheaded the event estimated that she worked approximately 20 hours per week for nearly a year to launch the event. Because she actively recruited a cadre of volunteers, future events should not be so time-intensive.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- McKenzie River Bicentennial Summary Report, prepared November, 2012 by Margaret Beilharz: this includes more information about marketing and event details
- Project Brochure

TRAVEL OREGON CONNECTION: The RTS Steering Committee was adopted under the Chamber of Commerce as its Tourism Committee. The Rural Tourism Studio matching grant for implementation included \$4,900 to support this project.

CONTACTS:

Margaret Beilharz, 541-514-7433: margaretbz@earthlink.net

Natalie Inouye, Travel Lane County, 541-743-8754: Natalie@travellanecounty.org

