

# Regional Collaboration and Impact

*A small but mighty network of public and private sector tourism champions has shifted how they work together based on new levels of trust, knowledge and capacity.*

Polk County represents one of the smaller geographic footprints for recent Rural Tourism Studio regions. Its size and location create both unique opportunities and challenges for collaboration.

- As noted in the community's RTS application, "While Polk County is decidedly rural, over 250,000 people live within a 30-minute drive, and we are only an hour from Portland."
- It is surrounded by well-known tourist destinations, so it experiences substantial visitor through-traffic alongside the farm equipment on its roads.
- Its communities range from dense suburban (the northwest part of the state capitol, Salem is located in Polk County) to farming communities and pristine coast range forests. The community character is diverse.
- Most of its population is concentrated on the east side of the county, providing easy access and fortuitous unplanned encounters. "We tend to share the same space and know the same people."
- Visitors to Western Oregon University in Monmouth can contribute to generating economies of scale for lodging, services and transportation infrastructure.
- The economy in the capitol region is relatively strong, and a collaborative environment is welcome by community leaders.

Leaders from the three largest communities in Polk County apart from Salem (Dallas, Independence and Monmouth), along with county representatives, had formed a tourism committee prior to the start of the Rural Tourism Studio. This group had begun work to coordinate and update its marketing strategy and marketing materials around a regional brand. But through the experience of working together intensively during the Rural Tourism Studio workshops, as well as with follow-up assistance from a full-time coordinator through the University of Oregon Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) program, working relationships grew stronger and more productive. These relationships changed the operating environment for tourism development in a positive way.

Changes in working relationships:

- One of the greatest initial challenges was that many local players did not feel represented by, or trustful of the Destination Marketing Organization for the Salem Metropolitan area, Travel Salem.
  - As stated by a key leader, "To be frank, we viewed them as 'They are Salem. They don't care about us. They are useless to us.' But really, we didn't know them. They showed up and participated, and that made the difference."
- The Rural Tourism Studio was a forum for learning about each other's roles, resources and ideas.

- "Travel Oregon/RTS did a great job of pulling people out of the woodwork, helping us all to get on a learning curve about how tourism works and the system of support that exists."
- The form of collaboration that emerged is more of a dispersed model/a stable of committed champions who trust/call on each other vs. formal action teams with regular meetings.
  - "While there is not a whole lot of increased collaboration in terms of bodies, there is increased capacity because people are more connected and committed to each other."
  - "RTS reinforced relationships. Even if you had met a couple of times before, it was easier to form a deeper relationship over the course of a workshop."
  - "Through the networks built, we have more of a quick response force. We all have these connections so that even if I haven't talked with them in year, I am comfortable reaching out on new ideas and initiatives."
  - "The RTS led us to develop and continue collaborating, but now focusing on getting some products underway. New people are popping up to participate in implementation, even though they aren't showing up at meetings."

#### Impact and early results

- The cities of Dallas, Monmouth, and Independence shared the cost of the initial matching funds with Travel Oregon for the first RARE position, whose term ended in the summer of 2017.
  - All three cities are contributing to the continuation of funding the full cost of another RARE coordinator for 2018. We have built perceived value to continue the investment. We wouldn't be able to do this before.
- Most cost-effective tourism marketing; leveraging local funds and priorities with Travel Salem.
- Rebranded and updated Polk County Tourism website and regional marketing materials.
- Have implemented project ideas that had been simmering for years, e.g. Polk County bike video.
- "There was initially some contention about attracting more bikes on the road interfering with farm equipment, so together we framed community outreach to show the economic benefits: visitors will buy from local businesses. We are continuing to do more outreach on safety issues."
- The new president of Western Oregon University is pursuing the new strategic plan's emphasis on "mutually beneficial relationships with the community." Both Monmouth and Independence are actively pursuing close relationships with the University as well, seeing it as a resource for tourism opportunities such as the recent solar eclipse, as well as other joint programming.
- Even though the community had to get beyond some issues: frustration with inclusion from Salem; an attitude of "we tried it once, and it didn't work"; and differences of opinion as to the quality of some products/assets for tourism - one participant

observed that “they have come a long way. They didn’t lay down and give up. Small towns want to survive. And I can see their love for their county.”

- And in the words of another, “I don’t see this as anything but an unqualified success.”

### **Model going forward**

There is increased trust and knowledge among key players influencing tourism in Polk County. However, the capacity is highly dependent on the people who are currently involved, and no one’s job is focused solely on tourism except at Travel Salem. For example, the Independence City Manager and Monmouth Community Development Director devote more time and energy to tourism than their counterparts in many other places, due to their own interest and the support of their city governments. This work is not line-item funded in city budgets. Funding for chamber staff has been tenuous given the size of communities in the region. The RARE position, renewed for a second year, covers 11 months and generally each renewal brings a new person into the position. Just as the “regional collaboration” aspect of the Rural Tourism Studio’s success was not specifically a funded activity, it will not likely be so in the future, despite its critical role as the “glue” between projects now and in the future.

With this capacity in mind, local leaders intend to sustain their collaborative project-related activity primarily through electronic communication and coordination. Two large meetings per year (with fun plus a little business) will engage new people, while energizing and propelling future action.