

## SETTING THE BENCHMARKS FOR PERFORMANCE & PARTNERSHIPS

**L**ocated on the Pacific coast of northwest Oregon, Tillamook County is a land akin to the west coast of British Columbia. Dominated by natural features including coniferous forests, farmland, rivers, bays and shoreline, its population of 24,000 is scattered along the north-south corridor established by the coastal Highway 101, never far from the open Pacific. Incorporated communities range from 260 in Nehalem to the county seat, Tillamook City, with its 4400 citizens. This

relatively small population occupying some 1125 square miles lives a rural life style within an economy that is based in large part on natural resources-driven industries. However, this is beginning to change. The quality of life, coupled with the relative proximity of Portland, are leading to a demographic shift as high-income second homeowners and retirees move to the region.

Known as the “land of cheese, trees, and ocean breeze,” the economic base since the mid-1800s has been forestry, fishing, dairy agriculture and, more recently, recreational tourism. The county’s industrial base experienced its first big jump when a railroad from Portland was built in 1911. Fish, trees, and dairy cows became dominant. In the 1930s and ’40s major forest fires, referred to locally as the “Tillamook Burn,” affected the county’s economic and envi-

ronmental health in ways still evident today. Following this local disaster came the war and with it a mini-boom, prompted in part by airships that were housed and maintained in the county. Massive wooden hangers - the legacy of this industry - are now a major air museum.

Tillamook County has an economic history not much different from much of coastal B.C. Dramatic landscapes rich in natural resources nurtured a citizenry with deep roots, who have taken pride in

their communities and fostered a cultural heritage grounded in a strong sense of place.

However, like much of coastal B.C., Tillamook County is not without its problems. Development pressures, declining natural resources, a shift to a lower wage service economy based on high income in-migrants and general economic uncertainty and instability have converged to present citizens of the county with challenging decisions. Driving these deci-



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sions, as will become evident over the course of this narrative, is a palpable desire among local residents to maintain and enhance Tillamook County's unique social, economic, and environmental character.

How, since 1989, this desire has been enlivened, supported, and impacted by the state-wide Oregon Benchmarks is the subject of this case study.

#### **ISSUES & CHALLENGES: TILLAMOOK COUNTY SINCE 1980**

Cumulative impacts flowing from several issues have been making themselves felt ever more keenly over the last 20 years throughout the communities of Tillamook County.

The forest industry has had to face significant challenges over several decades. The "Tillamook Burn" consumed 13 billion board feet of lumber and contributed to significant amounts of erosion into streams, rivers, and Tillamook Bay. The famous Spotted Owl controversy in the '80s also had a major impact on local harvesting. Representing the deepening societal concern for the health of the forest eco-system, the spotted owl has significantly modified the practices of the industry. No longer is there a social license that allows business interest to ignore eco-system impacts.

There have been, and continue to be, major difficulties in the fishing industry. First, the salmon segment of the industry has been damaged by environmental degradation and habitat destruction (Tillamook burn, forestry practices, and agriculture) and over-harvesting. Stocks are in trouble throughout the state.

Second, the movement from local fisheries to offshore factory ships has continued, further alienating the coastal communities from the resource base. Third, warmer ocean temperatures appear to be harming salmon populations.

The dairy industry has historically been an economic and cultural mainstay of the County. However, worsening flooding has reduced the production of forage crops and grazing land and caused significant property damage as well. (The average elevation of the county is seven meters above sea level.) In addition, some agricultural practices have contributed to pollution and degradation of streams and wetlands.

Water quality has deteriorated due to the aforementioned activities as well as to more urban types of pollution such as sewage effluent, storm water run-off, and human encroachment on habitat.

This overall degradation of the resource base and the accompanying economic consequences were for years unattended to. Government responses were short-term and piecemeal. While there was a lot of research and planning, there was no co-ordinated or meaningful long-term development plan. The state government's shift to a focus on high-tech industrial recruitment and development in the '90s, while benefiting the Interstate 5 highway corridor, passed Tillamook County by.

A major feature of the decline, especially in the '80s, was the steady increase in social problems that accompanied the curtailment of natural resource harvesting and related plant and mill clo-

tures. Poverty increased as did other family pressures, revealed in higher rates of divorce, single parent families, teen pregnancy, and juvenile arrest. Also reported by those who lived through this period was a decreasing sense of community, increased concern for citizen safety, and a loss of much sense of control or influence. Civic participation was in decline. Trust in government was significantly eroded.

An area in which the economic decline makes itself known today is the pressure on local government to maintain existing infrastructure and carry out legislated upgrades. These responsibilities are proving very difficult to fulfill. With the decline in the traditional economy, there was an erosion of the local tax base. This in turn led to delays in much needed re-investment in infrastructure. Thus, somewhat ironically, the recent and accelerating influx of retirees and second homeowners to the area, while bolstering local service and retail trade (a plus in the view of many locals) is increasing the pressure on already inadequate infrastructure.

#### **THE 1990s - A DECADE OF INNOVATION & TRANSITION**

By the end of the '80s, Tillamook County was in a predicament not a whole lot different than that of many Oregon counties overly dependent on the forest industry. The crisis, worsened by harvest reductions across the state due to the White Owl controversy, had Oregon's economy reeling. A deep recession had settled across the state. The Democratic governor of the time was forced to find a way of articulating a new, strategic vision for

the state. Thus was born Oregon Shines (1989), the formation of the Oregon Progress Board, and ultimately, the establishment of the **Oregon Benchmarks** and the subsequent biennial reports beginning in 1991.

### **The National Estuary Program**

By the early 1990s, it was evident that the environmental problems facing Tillamook Bay - accumulating sediment, shellfish closures, groundfish closures, declining salmon runs - were threatening the future well-being of the people who called Tillamook County home. And it was not just the Bay. Decreasing water quality meant violations of federal clean water standards and the amount of sediment in the streams and rivers flowing into the Bay was increasing, as were the frequency of floods.

For these reasons the citizens of the County, with the help of the governor, nominated Tillamook Bay to the National Estuary Program. The nomination was approved by the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 1994. This created the federally sponsored Tillamook Bay National Estuary Project (TBNEP).

The TBNEP developed a planning partnership involving local, state, and federal agencies, as well as citizens, educators, and industry to create the Tillamook Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan (CCMP). Over a 4-year period, the participants agreed to 62 specific actions that would begin to address a century of accumulated environmental problems in the watershed. It was a tremendous achievement that testified to the dedication and perseverance of all participants. In 1999 the plan was approved by the management committee, the EPA, and the governor of Oregon.

It is important to note that at the same time the EPA was announcing the award of the National Estuary project, the Oregon Progress Board was well on its

way to preparing its third biennial report to the people of Oregon. Eventually, these state-wide benchmarks would inspire, leverage, and help define work that would mark Tillamook as an county of innovation and progress. Also important in 1994 was Governor Roberts energetic negotiation of the Oregon Option with Vice-President Gore. This agreement aimed to radically reduce federal bureaucracy and to increase regulatory and fiscal flexibility in exchange for outcome-defined accountability. None of this was lost on the committed leadership working away in the trenches of Tillamook County.

### **The Tillamook Performance Partnership**

Having an official plan to “restore the balance” within damaged watersheds is not the same as getting the work underway and making some real progress. In 1998,

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the Financial Strategies Action Committee of the Estuary Project, drawing on the Oregon Benchmarks and the spirit of the Oregon Option, forged the Tillamook Bay Performance Partnership.

A Performance Partnership is defined in the U.S.-Oregon context as “an agreement among all levels of government to streamline inputs (capital, labour, etc.) into mutually agreed-upon projects to achieve mutually agreed-upon outcomes.” Derived in part from Gore’s campaign to reinvent government (the “National Performance Review”), state and

local authorities lead project implementation while federal agencies provide much of the funding.

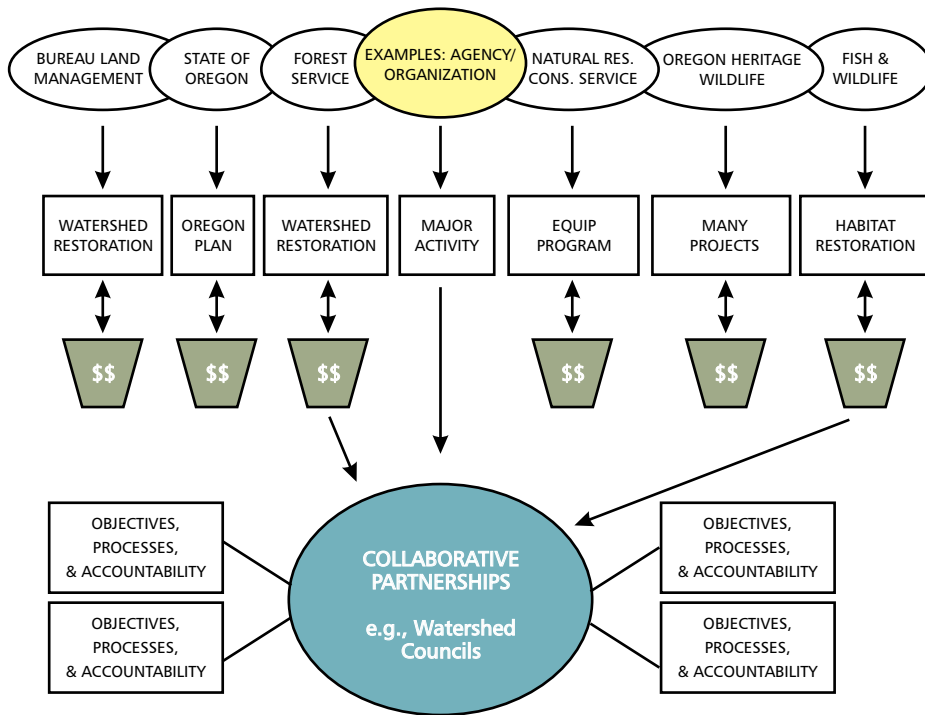
Tillamook County made sure all the pieces came together in the Tillamook Performance Partnership. Federal funding and services are tied to outcomes defined by the three levels of government. Outcomes are defined by integrating action goals with the Oregon Benchmarks, thus assuring wide agreement and concrete means to measure progress.

Depicted in Diagram 1 on the following page is the situation the Tillamook Partnership is seeking to transform. While many agencies and organizations share an objective to improve watershed/ecosystem health, each maintains separate processes and funding sources. Collaborative processes that have developed in Oregon (watershed councils, for example) are forced to spend consider-

able time and energy seeking a wide variety of funding sources and adhering to all sorts of independent processes, procedures, and requirements. A hypothetical project may be charted as this one is, with each agency pursuing its own funding for similar projects. Despite similar project goals, the objectives, processes, and accountability all vary from agency to agency.

Diagram 1 (p. 4) shows how little coordination exists among resource agencies despite similar missions of resource conservation and enhancement. The Tillamook County Performance

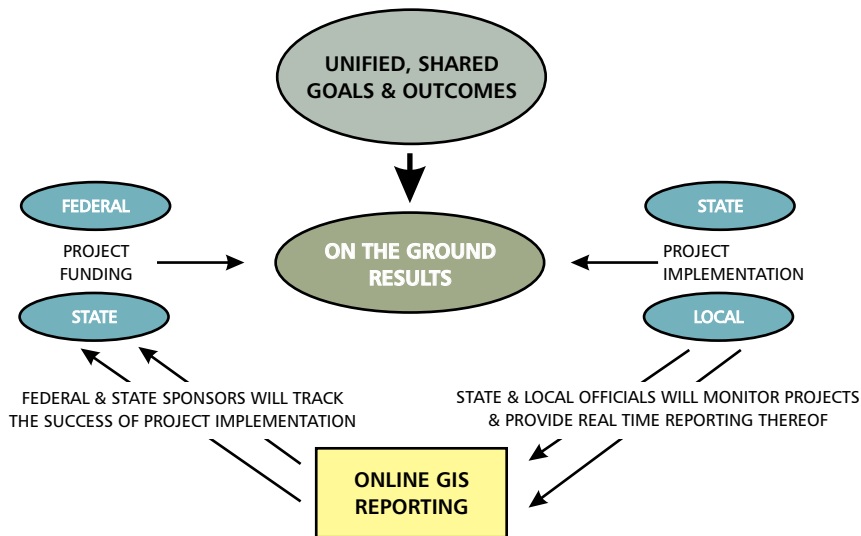
DIAGRAM 1



Partnership model depicted in Diagram 2 is based upon the premise of mutually agreed-upon goals and outcomes. Agencies and other partners agree on what the goals and outcomes of a project should be and then funding and implementation agents tailor their resources accordingly.

Once agencies at all levels of government agree on these goals and outcomes (through a Memorandum of Understanding, for example), a Performance Partnership provides for longer term project funding and much enhanced flexibility for front-line managers.

DIAGRAM 2



The evolution of technology to a point where on-line, GIS-based reporting is possible is another feature of the Performance Partnership that has significant potential to cut costs and more effectively focus efforts. Accountability becomes transparent to all interested parties and the waste of multiple agency reporting is reduced. (This system is at the early stages of development. Its full potential was far from being realized as of September 2000.)

It is hard to see how a partnership involving over 120 members (community leaders and organizations, state and federal agencies, industries and local governments, and private citizens) could be launched or sustained over time without either the estuary plan with its 62 specific action areas or the benchmarks.

The challenge ahead is considerable. Financing from the EPA continues, but represents a smaller amount and makes up only about 16% of the funding requirements. State agencies with mandates directly relevant to specific actions make up 34%. Local funding makes up only 2%, leaving a huge unidentified gap in implementation funding. Here again, the plan and the benchmarks provide the framework for leveraging resources from multiple sources.

Early experience, garnered from local respondents, suggests the role of Oregon Benchmarks and the Oregon Option will be of ongoing importance.

The Oregon Option, although no longer a formal federal priority, is being used by local spark plugs and activists to provide tentative bureaucrats with the security and blessing they need to take action.

Leveraging the benefits of the Oregon Benchmarks and Oregon Options does not happen automatically. The fact that each of these tools is a sanctioned means to bring people into relationship with each other is the first critical step. The second is to translate these relationships



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into new patterns of behaviour and a broader array of resources. Local respondents clearly indicated that this is beginning to happen. Third, the commitment to outcomes and to transparent accountability help keep a complex implementation process on track.

It takes time and focus to build leadership. The focus of the plan, and the learning that takes place through tracking benchmarks over time, are building new leadership. It is also attracting some excellent leaders who, in the absence of a meaningful framework for participation, were uninvolved in public means to address collective issues and challenges. Benchmarks have helped the “cream rise to the top.”

#### **BUILDING A STRATEGIC VISION & BENCHMARKS AT THE COUNTY LEVEL**

In the latter stages of the tremendous effort to complete the CCMP, the Tillamook County Commissioners, with assistance from the Tillamook Economic Development Council, decided to initiate a county-wide strategic visioning process. In 1996, the county government appointed a 12-member “Futures Council” to carry out the task. With assistance from the Oregon Community Planning Workshop, a university-based technical assistance organization, a 6-month strategic visioning process was initiated in January 1998. The following section summarizes the key components of this very skillfully managed process.

#### **County Planning Process**

Focus groups provided an opportunity to identify the special insights and concerns of community members with specialized skills and expertise. The Futures Council identified 17 groups that they felt would provide a representative cross-section of Tillamook County’s public and private sector activities. Each group was asked to identify aspects of the county they liked and wanted to maintain in the future. Each group was also asked to identify aspects of the county that should be changed to improve the quality of life in the year 2020.

Survey research was used to provide an equal opportunity for all residents and property owners to voice their opinion about the county’s strengths and weaknesses. The focus group participants provided suggestions for features of the county to maintain and those to change. These features were presented in a survey as statements with which residents could agree or disagree. Surveys were randomly distributed by mail to 4,000 county households and to 200 high school students. Comparative results for the adult and high school respondents were prepared and distributed.

Newsletters described the visioning process and shared the results from each of the stages. The first described the 2020 visioning process. The second presented the results of the household surveys and invited residents to public meetings where strategies would be developed to guide the long-range visions and goals

of the county. The third newsletter was a draft of the Vision, Goals, and Strategies. Residents were encouraged to review the draft and make recommendations for improvements, although no changes were made without supporting evidence from the focus group and survey results. The fourth newsletter presented the final version of the Futures Council Visions, Goals and Strategies.

Making Appropriate Plans and Strategies (MAPS), an interactive group strategy development process, was the focus of the first series of public meetings. Using survey results, participants in each of the five meetings held around the county were asked to consider a set of questions that emerged from the focus group and survey process. More than 500 possible strategies emerged.

Electronic polling was used at a second round of public meetings after the release of the third newsletter. Over 100 people attended five public sessions where, using hand-held voting keypads, they indicated their level of support for the draft goals and strategies, and ranked them in order of priority.

The results of all of this work, which involved more than 1200 individuals, was the definition of 19 goals and 52 strategies for guiding development of the county over the next 20 years.

The goals are expressed as desired, long-term outcomes for the county. Although interrelated and interconnected, the goals are divided into four distinct categories: Growth and

Development, Natural Environment, Economy and Society, and Culture. Within each of these major themes and their related goals and strategies, specific benchmarks are established.

After the publication of the vision, county commissioners took action on immediate priorities. Shortly thereafter, the Futures Council undertook to assess the condition of Tillamook County by quantitatively evaluating the vision's goals and related benchmarks. This will serve as a baseline as the county works towards its 2020 Vision. The Futures Council published its first Benchmark Report in July 2000.

The benchmarks contained in the vision follow the Oregon Progress Board model. Like the Progress Board, the Futures Council uses benchmarks to monitor progress towards its vision. In fact, the Futures Council uses the Oregon Progress Board's benchmarks as much as possible. One criterion for benchmark selection is the ready availability of local data. Because the Futures Council wants to be able to show trends over time, this is very important. A second criterion is that benchmarks reflect the goals contained in the vision. Since the strategic vision is based on extensive public input, indicators must assess those interests vital to the citizens of the county.

There are already several examples of impacts of the overall approach of this work. An education consortium has come together to address the strategies for youth-at-risk. Benchmarks projects include curriculum-related revision and the establishment of a youth corps that is engaged in a range of watershed restoration projects. A private forest landholder has initiated a process of making more effective use of riparian land near an urban area. In co-operation with local officials they linked trail development and reclamation of a slough to downtown and waterfront revitalization. In fact, the water-

front was given away to the town to use in return for a tax benefit. A government agency (Health and Human Resources) undertook to partner with local groups to create community gardens as a means of reducing poverty.

The local leadership involved in the benchmarking work is very careful to recognize certain limitations of benchmarks. They note that because some goals are easily assigned a benchmark for which data is readily available, the potential exists for policy-makers to displace the importance of goals and strategies that may not be easily measured. This is a mistake for which there is no simple solution other than awareness

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and diligence. For those goals that cannot be measured, focussing on implementation of the strategies on the ground will act as one corrective. Over time, the Futures Council will continue to seek out and test appropriate benchmarks.

Meanwhile, implementation of initiatives is being facilitated by the specificity of the outcomes. Partnerships are forming and resources are being mobilized from within and leveraged from outside. However, this is not all happening through county government or outside agencies, or the Futures Council for that matter. An important ingredient in the development mix over the last several years is a remarkable, very small organization known as the Tillamook Economic Development Council.

### **Tillamook Economic Development Council**

One person described this local activist development organization as the "mirror behind the candle." One might use other metaphors to describe the background role played by the EDC – yeast, leaven, sparkplug, to name a few.

The EDC is elected and until about four years ago, had a budget of only \$15,000. Through talented leadership and dedication, the EDC has increased its budget to a modest \$105,000. However, it has been a key thinker, planner, organizer, and developer behind the scenes. Constantly weaving between a wide range of local actors and agencies

and state and federal agencies, the EDC and its director play a key role in leveraging additional resources into local capacity building and leadership development. One example is the Futures Council initiative. For this and other priorities, they brought \$700,000 into the county last year.

In addition to leadership development and capacity building, the EDC has two other major goals: eco-system industry development and commercial re-development focussed on making the best use of resources. They have created a loan fund to support ecologically-viable business development, and to provide that sector with information and networking services, as well as some basic technical assistance. With respect to commercial re-development, the organizing,



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facilitating, and resource brokerage support are important to the local officials working in the various towns. Tillamook City is a major focus in this work.

What is important to note here is that the growing capacity of the EDC is a critical piece of the Tillamook transition story. The strategic thinking and integrating it has been able to provide and facilitate in the county is fundamental to success. As the director pointed out, without some means by which capacity building can be maintained as a priority focus (something that is missing from most governmental agencies), strategic visioning and benchmarks will not carry the day. Ultimately, people organized together to achieve common goals are the critical ingredient in making change happen. It takes capacity to set the strategic vision and define the benchmarks. It takes even more capacity to ensure the action is sustained over time. "Too often" the EDC director noted, "government forgets this most important fact."

#### **SOME PARTING REFLECTIONS**

The case of Tillamook County is not a story of some linear string of impacts occurring as a result of the introduction of the Oregon Benchmarks at the state level. Rather, the Benchmarks seem to have been, at least in the early '90s, more like some cleverly designed wallpaper which over time infiltrates the consciousness of more and more citizens.

However, over the last five years, with the convergence of the estuary planning

program, deterioration in the social and natural environment, and the establishment of some focussed local leadership (the EDC), the Oregon Benchmarks have become an effective, creative tool for shaping local planning efforts, for leveraging local and external resources, and for forging co-operation between diverse stakeholders.

The Oregon Progress Board has inspired, informed, and, in some instances, provided guidance to Tillamook efforts. The Board's efforts to refine the benchmarks at the state level, its assistance to state agencies to implement outcome-based performance systems (linked to the Oregon Benchmarks) - it all contributes to the culture of collaboration developing between the Board and local and county level governments. Recent moves by the governor's office are supportive in this regard. The Community Solutions Teams and Regional Partnerships it has established reinforce this co-operative approach to governance and community problem-solving. (When we walked into a meeting with the regional development officer responsible for Tillamook County, one of the first things he put in front of us was the Futures Council's July 2000 Benchmark Report.)

In closing, consider the perceptive remarks of at least four people we interviewed. Following an array of analytical and technically motivated questions, each of these people ascribed to strategic visioning and benchmarking two impor-

tant impacts - hope and meaning. Local people have come to *hope* that it was possible to shape change, and have derived *meaning* from their part in a collective effort. In a cynical, rapidly changing world, these outcomes are perhaps hard to measure. Nevertheless, they remain of fundamental importance to mobilizing the human effort necessary to address the tremendous challenges we collectively face. ❧

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