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Cottonwood Canyon State Park (CCSP) Experience Center¹
Condon, OR
July 9th, 2012

Introductions

The meeting began with a special welcome to Judge Burch of the Wheeler County Board of Commissioners (Fossil), the mayors of Fossil and Condon, and Erin Stone, who were invited to share their perspectives and ideas for the Experience Center.

Presentations

Judge Burch began by sharing her experiences with the Oregon Paleo Lands Institute (OPLI) and with Fossil's community weight-loss program. Erin Stone, who played a major role in the development of the CCSP Experience Center project then shared her original vision. Oregon Parks and Recreation (OPRD) followed with a presentation of a draft map of the park, two draft floor plans for the Experience Center, and a spreadsheet of potential audiences and experiences the park will attract and the resource requirements for each.

Common themes emerging from these presentations and the following discussion were **local/community buy-in, publicity, economic development, and capitalizing on unique resources**. There was unanimous support for the CCSP and the center among elected officials. They spoke to the economic, historic, and cultural benefits that could be realized for their cities and counties.

Local/community Buy-In

- OPRD is interested in incorporating the human resources of the surrounding area as a new approach to park management.
- It is important to include the school districts in park programming: the original vision for the Experience Center included "trading" outdoor school classes between coastal, valley and high desert ecosystems. There are examples in Oregon of students using parks as an educational resource from kindergarten through grade twelve.
- EOU/Regional Solutions is interested in facilitating community partnerships (park staffing, educational programming, and possibly economic development).
- The mayors of Fossil and Condon would be willing to commit to being part of an advisory group for the park on an ongoing basis.

¹OPRD has suggested a name change to "Experience Center" to present a wide variety of experiences in the park and surrounding area, which will include educational and interpretive programs that will connect visitors to the area as well as ensure safety and appropriate behavior in the park.

- There needs to be further work at developing buy-in in Condon and Moro; some people still think of the park as being “somewhere else”.
- There is still a need for community feedback on programming and additional activities and partnerships.

Publicity

- Judge Burch estimated that OPLI attracts 4000-5000 visitors per year, and OPRD predicts similar numbers for CCSP.
- It is important to attract different audiences and experiences: in the case of OPLI, they market to children as well as adults who are interested in educational experiences or geology (Elderhostel or Roads Scholars members, for example).
- “What can you do in a weekend?” has been effective marketing strategy in the past.
- OPRD has plans for suggested experiences (a two-hour or four-hour visit, for example).
- There are opportunities for partnerships between CCSP, OPLI, and Maryhill Museum.

Economic Development

- Condon is conducting a Main Street program that revitalizes downtown areas, putting them in a better position to accommodate visitors.
- Attracting park visitors to surrounding communities will require venture capital for gas, food and lodging.
- Partnerships between OPRD and local businesses will be mutually beneficial (perhaps through a seminar led by the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District).

Capitalizing on Unique Resources

- The Experience Center has the potential to be a hub for attractions in the John Day River Basin.
- OPLI is one of two public fossil beds in the U.S, and the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument is located, in part, in Wheeler County. Wheeler County is also home to the Painted Hills Natural Beef Company. What other unique resources exist around the park?
- There are opportunities to attract bicyclists, motorcyclists, and rafters who are already making use of the area; a tour bus could meet people using the park or river to take them to commercial centers and other tourist attractions.
- There are opportunities to capitalize on public interest in wind energy.
- The park provides an opportunity for ranchers and wheat farmers to tell their stories and reach out to the larger community who may not understand rural land management practices.
- Bonneville Power Administration could possibly provide technicians for educational presentations.
- There are opportunities to hold writing workshops or to invite athletes to the area for high elevation training.

Discussion

A discussion of the material covered in the presentations produced the following suggestions and ideas:

- The group preferred the educational Experience Center floor plan but also wanted to ensure sufficient administrative space, and particularly liked the fireplace area and lab spaces. There are two unspecified rooms that could be used as storage for groups or volunteer supplies, as well as a closet/kitchen combination.
- There is the capacity for permanent exhibits at the Experience Center, but it will most likely have rotating exhibits, which will provide opportunities for dynamic community connections.
- Putting community members on a rotating staff.
- Creating a place for community art.
- Using technology as a back up for programming in case of a lack of volunteers.

Next Steps

OPRD gave the following schedule for work and financing of CCSP and the Experience Center:

- Entrance road by January 2013.
- Primary welcome facilities (restrooms, parking, and camping) will follow.
- Once concepts for the Experience Center are complete, OPRD will fast track the center design.
- Funding will come primarily from OPRD (infrastructure) and from fundraising through the Oregon State Parks Foundation (facilities). Friends groups and others are anticipated to assist with curriculum development and programming.

Closing Comments

Before the next meeting, the group agreed to move toward a Declaration of Cooperation by putting ideas in writing and starting to identify individual and group commitments.