Rebuilding Vernonia: Tracking Community Vitality and Change in Rural Oregon

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OSU College of Forestry
Session outline

• Community indicator projects – an overview
• Vernonia, Oregon – how we got here
• The Vital Vernonia Indicator Project
• University and community engagement - successes and lessons learned
What are community indicators?

A set of common measures that can be tracked to monitor the vitality of a community over time.

“scorecard”

“vital signs”

“dashboard”

Quality of life

How are we doing?

Are our community investments paying off?

Are people better off than before?

Often created in conjunction with a community visioning process.
Defining Vitality

Capacity to work productively together and realize positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

- Economic health
- Environmental quality
- Social well-being
- Social capital
Indicator Projects

Listed here is a selection of indicator projects. CIC does not claim involvement or endorse any projects, but we find these interesting and informative. Use the submit projects button above to tell us about additional projects to include and notify us of broken links at database@communityindicators.net. Be sure to see the winners of the annual Community Indicators Awards program by looking at our Awards page.

In addition to these indicator projects, CIC also hosts a Working Group on Integrating Community Indicators and Performance Measures. See the CI-PM section of our website for more information about the project and examples of places where Community Indicator Projects are being integrated with Performance Measures to improve the use of information in collaborative community decision-making.
Economic Vitality

A vibrant community is almost always rooted in a solid economic base. Without it, efforts to achieve excellence in all facets of community life will falter. This category covers many dimensions of a solid regional economy: Jobs, earnings, income levels, diversification of the economy and the distribution of income. Given their increasingly important role in Walla Walla, tourism and the arts also appear here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2.1 Per Capita Personal Income</th>
<th>2.10 Employment Shares of the Top 4 Sectors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Median Household Income</td>
<td>2.11 Average Annual Wage in Top 4 Sectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Annual Taxable Retail Sales</td>
<td>2.12 Overall Average Annual Wage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Retail Trade Sales Per Capita</td>
<td>2.13 Employment Concentration Top 5 Sectors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 Assessed Value of Taxable Property</td>
<td>2.14 Number of Firms &amp; Their Growth Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 Property Tax Roll</td>
<td>2.15 Market Value of Ag Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 Residential Building Permits</td>
<td>2.16 Firms with 0-9 Employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 Labor Force Size &amp; Participation Rate</td>
<td>2.17 Unemployment Rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 Employment by Type of Employer</td>
<td>2.18 Income Distribution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Missoula Measures

What is Missoula Measures?

Missoula Measures consists of selected data, links and other information on scores of topics related to health and quality of life in Missoula, Montana. These data are updated regularly.

This website was developed Greg Oliver at Missoula City-County Health Dept.

Definition of the project

A good, quick source of several health measures for individual counties in the US can be found at: Missoula County Health Rankings
Why do an indicator project?

• Measure impact of activities; return on investment
• Develop shared measures for collective action
• Communicate with community
• Inform and prioritize targets for action
Audience Participation!!

Think and Share.

• What is an issue or goal your community is working toward?
• What indicator could provide evidence of progress toward that goal?
• How might the data be obtained?
• Who in your community has a stake/could be a partner?
Setting the Stage: Vernonia, Oregon
About Vernonia…

Pioneer farmers

Oregon American Sawmill

Timber culture

2010 Population:
• 2,200 (city);
• 3,300 (zip code, 98 miles²)

1 hour commute to Portland

Banks-Vernonia State Trail
About Vernonia...

History of Flooding
1894 (earliest recorded)
1996
2007...
2007 Flood Damage

All K-12 School buildings, Health Clinic, Food Bank, Senior Center, wastewater treatment plant, both electric substations

1,100 homes (800 substantially damaged)
Rebuilding

2007  1 million hours of volunteer aid
2008  Oregon Solutions designation to rebuild schools
2009  $13 million bond measure passed
2010  Vernonia Rural Sustainability Program (K-12) launched
2012  New schools open ($40 million)
2014? Co-located health clinic, food bank, senior ctr, etc.
Economic and community impact

Like many rural towns across the Northwest, Vernonia’s schools are the heart and soul of its community, and in many ways the glue that holds it together. As the only large gathering place in the city, the school is the town’s civic center. Its high school football team, the Loggers, galvanizes residents on Friday nights, and its wrestling team regularly reaches state competitions. In a town without a movie theater, the school’s drama and band productions provide the arts and entertainment. The school also hosts many large events, including meetings, dancing, and much of the community’s signature event, the annual Friendship Jamboree.

Vernonia’s proximity to the silicon forest and its small-town charm have made it an attractive choice for families wishing to relocate. But several major residential development projects, including a new 67-lot subdivision, are stalled until the schools are rebuilt. The options for this attractive town center—with room for sustainable growth as part of the city’s long range plan, and a vibrant economic future and burgeoning tax base for this community—are on hold without the schools.
How our Vernonia indicator project got its start

Vernonia Rural Sustainability Program development

2010 Mission Statement:

“The Vernonia Rural Sustainability Center will provide collaborative educational opportunities for K-12 students of Vernonia and the surrounding region as well as for higher education students and faculty. The Center will also serve as an economic development catalyst for Vernonia and the region with opportunities for workforce training and the development of new sustainable natural resources industries.”
**Inputs**
- School district admin, teachers, students
- OSU Extension, College of Forestry
- $40 million +
- Green campus facilities
- Timber industry partners
- Ford Community Leaders
- Community health board

**Outputs**
- Improved K-12 curriculum
- K-12 Service learning: watershed projects
- Community college offerings
- Woody biomass utilization
- Higher Ed: community based research & engagement
- Community services (food bank, clinic)

**Outcomes**
- School district saves on energy costs
- Students gain job skills
- Nehalem River health
- Flood resilience
- Social capital
- Families choose to live in Vernonia
- Economic viability of forestlands
How our Vernonia indicator project got its start

University Faculty Field Tour & Scoping Session

Research Topic:
$40 million public/private investment over 4 years... what is the impact on residents’ quality of life and well being?
Community Indicator Projects in Rural Oregon

Guiding Questions:

• What are the indicators of community vitality?
• How vital are rural Oregon communities?

Vital Tillamook Indicator Project
Vital Wallowa Indicator Project
2009
Project Approach

Community-based participatory research

STEP 1
Assemble Project

STEP 2
Develop Indicators of Vitality

STEP 3
Collect Indicator Data

STEP 4
Assess Vitality

STEP 5
Disseminate Findings, inspire action
## Project timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 – 11</td>
<td>Exploratory work, identifying community partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring – Summer 2012</td>
<td>Gathered and reviewed strategic planning documents; extracted community goals &amp; visions; compiled “menu” of indicator data sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>Advisory committee formed – monthly work sessions 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;, 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; and 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; drafts of goals &amp; indicators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Winter – Spring 2013 | Final indicator set developed  
Community surveys developed |
| Summer 2013   | Summer intern hired  
Data collection |
| Fall 2013     | Complete data collection  
Draft report |
| Winter 2014   | Publish report  
Community forums – “moving to action” |
## Indicator Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Livability and Community Engagement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth and Education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Well-Being</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural Resources</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...more “bottom up” than “top down”
Indicator Data Sources

Secondary

• U.S. Census, American Communities Survey
• State agencies
• Local sources (school district, city of Vernonia, Oregon Healthy Teens Survey)

Primary

• Four surveys (household, student, business, community organization)
• Advisory Committee members
Some example indicators

- **Short-term (output)**
  - Primary data source: survey

- **Long-term (outcome)**
  - Secondary data source: census, government
Livability and Community Engagement

**Goal:** Vernonia is a desirable place to live.

**Secondary data source**

**Indicator:** % of households with children under 18

**Source:** U.S. Census

**Result:** 46% (2010)

**Primary data source**

**Indicator:** Percentage of adult residents that grew up in Vernonia, left, and then returned by choice to live there as an adult

**Source:** Household Survey

**Result:** 19% (2013)
## Economy

**Goal:** Natural resources contribute to Vernonia’s local economy.

### Primary data source

**Indicator:** % of households where some income comes from natural resources related activity or services  
**Source:** Household survey  
**Result:** 27%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Income share</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>most (3/4) or all</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than 1/2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about 1/2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>up to 1/4</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>none</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Secondary data source

**Indicator:** 5-year investment in stream restoration projects in the Upper Nehalem watershed  
**Source:** Oregon Water Resources Inventory  
**Result:** $2.64 million (2007-11)
Health and Well Being

**Goal:** Residents have access to the health care services they need.

**Short-term (output)**

**Indicator:** Number of hours/year that a primary care clinic is open in Vernonia

**Source:** Advisory Committee

**Result:** 120 (2012-13)

**Long-term (outcome)**

**Indicator:** Percentage of Vernonia adults that say they have access to the health care services they need

**Source:** Household Survey

**Result:** 55% (2013)
Environment and Natural Resources

Goal: The Vernonia Rural Sustainability Program is successfully contributing to positive environmental and educational outcomes.

**Short-term (output)**

**Indicator:** % of VSD teachers doing service learning or project-based learning related to natural resources  
**Source:** VSD  
**Result:** 100%

**Long-term (outcome)**

**Indicator:** Days/year that Nehalem River temperature exceeds standard for fish  
**Source:** Oregon Dept of Fish & Wildlife  
**Result:** Pending

**Indicator:** % of students that say they take pride in their school or community  
**Source:** Student Survey  
**Result:** 74%
Community and Student Engagement

Graduate Course Objectives

1. Learn from community leaders.
2. Learn and apply social science concepts.
3. Sharpen listening, thinking, communication skills.
4. Foster dialogue between OSU and rural communities.

Course instructors of record: John Bliss, Kate MacTavish
Methods

- Reading, seminars, discussion, writing
- Interviews and conversations
- Community meals, events
- Forest, farm, ranch, mill tours
- Service projects
Communities and Natural Resources Class

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 Schedule (Tentative/Condensed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tuesday, Sept. 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What's this all about? Key theoretical foundations, class logistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, Sept. 5</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land tenure and resource management in the Coast Range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday, Sept. 6</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest health and community health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Friday, Sept. 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustaining rural communities: schools, bioenergy, healthcare, and football</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Saturday, Sept. 8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service project, free time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sunday, Sept. 9</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Through the Gorge, over the Great Basin, to the Wallowa Valley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monday, Sept. 10</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of the non-profit, non-governmental sector in rural development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tuesday, Sept. 11</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics in rural Oregon: youth, ethnic diversity, migration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wednesday, Sept. 12</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitating planet Earth: Humans, Salmon, Cattle and Wolves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community service project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday, Sept. 13</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Synthesis</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Friday, Sept 14</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date TBD</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Walkabout, Listen, Observe, Discuss
Service Learning – Developing Draft Indicator Framework
Sharing
Graduate student reflection:

“The indicator project was one of the most informative activities of the course. This project was especially important in helping to ground what we learned about, through interactions with residents and in the readings, in a real world experience. The goals, indicators, and supporting data helped me think about building community capacity at a local level using a thoughtful, measurable approach.”
University Engagement – What worked

For students:
• Immersion
• Time for reflection
• Meaningful service-learning project

For instructors:
• Relationship building
• Clear roles & responsibilities
• Planning

For community partners:
• Engagement that is relevant and serves an authentic need
• Students that were checked in
Consider your role within your university. Is there an opportunity for you to engage in this work of community indicators? How so? How might community indicator projects intersect with the work that you do (teaching, advising, research, service-learning)?
Project supporters – Thanks!

OSU Extension Service - Columbia County
OSU Rural Studies Program
The Ford Family Foundation
City of Vernonia/Vernonia Prevention Coalition
Vernonia School District and Aaron Miller, Principal
Lena Etuk
Shawn Morford
John Bliss
Kate MacTavish
VVIP Advisory Committee: DeAnna Pearl, Scott Laird, Nicholas Welch, Donna Webb, Bill Langmaid, Jack Harvey, Bill Haack