

## **Project Description**

### ***Connect Cascade Locks: A Recreational Trails Plan for Economic Development***

#### **Introduction**

Cascade Locks, a rural Oregon town of 1,100 residents, lies 45 miles east of the Portland metropolitan area in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The community has struggled with several highly controversial proposals for job creation, including a casino and a water bottling plant. In an attempt to find common ground, the city leadership looked to their existing assets, including their potential for recreational tourism. Several regional trails pass through town, including the Pacific Crest Trail and the Historic Columbia River Highway State Trail, and new trails were in various planning and construction phases. However, no comprehensive plan existed to connect these trails into a coordinated system, or to tie local and regional trail development directly to local economic growth. The Port of Cascade Locks approached the Portland State University Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning to propose a community trails plan as a final student workshop project. Between January and June of 2012 the student team, called Celilo Planning Studio, and the Port of Cascade Locks conducted *Connect Cascade Locks: a Recreational Trails Plan for Economic Development*.

**The purpose of *Connect Cascade Locks* was to identify strategies to increase the economic development prospects of the community of Cascade Locks through a regionally integrated recreational trails network.**

The planning process brought together local residents, city, and state agencies, and advocacy groups to plan a future for Cascade Locks as a newfound hiking, biking and boating destination in the Columbia Gorge. Stakeholders who had previously sparred over economic development projects found in this plan a vision of economic and environmental prosperity on which they could all agree. Residents emphasized that the things visitors wanted, such as a brewery, a coffee shop, and better beach access, would improve the quality of life for locals too. Celilo Planning Studio helped the community reframe the city's stunning scenic beauty and existing trails as an economic asset.

#### **Building Public Support**

The success of the final plan was rooted in a rigorous public process which utilized many platforms to interact with a variety of audiences (see LTR[Carron].pdf).

#### *Background Research*

To better understand the needs and desires of the residents of Cascade Locks and the trail users who frequent the Gorge, the team conducted two surveys. The first was an online trail user survey, promoted through trail user group newsletters, public agencies, local businesses, news articles, and social media. The purpose of this survey was to identify the stated preferences and spending habits of different trail users, including hikers, cyclists, equestrians, and sailors. More than 1,300 unique responses were collected and analyzed. This survey proved to be equal parts data collection and public outreach tool because it alerted participants about the project and directed them to the project homepage.

The second survey was only for community residents. Mailed to all 450 households in Cascade Locks, the survey received more than fifty responses. The results showed community support for trails and outlined some of the major community priorities and concerns. Most importantly, the results of these two surveys allowed Celilo Planning Studio to identify community priorities which aligned with the spending patterns and preferences of trail users.

#### *Public Meetings*

The initial research results guided the discussions in two public workshops. The workshops divided attendees into groups to brainstorm opportunities for trail infrastructure improvements and recreation-oriented business development (see Image2.jpg). Nearly 40 individuals attended, including business owners, local officials and trail advocates. The results from these workshops were organized into draft recommendations, which were presented at a public open house, garnering more than thirty additional comments. For those who could not attend the open house, Celilo Planning Studio offered a "Virtual Open House" on the project website, where the posters and the PowerPoint presentations were available for comment.

The final recommendations were presented at a joint meeting of the City Council and Port Commission. After the presentation, Celilo Planning Studio answered questions, accepted comments, and heard support from partner organizations.

#### *On the Web*

Celilo Planning Studio maintained an online presence through a website, [connectcascadelocks.com](http://connectcascadelocks.com), which hosted information about public meetings, online surveys, marketing materials and contact information. Through the social media outlets of [Twitter feed](https://twitter.com/ConnectCL) (twitter.com/ConnectCL) and [Facebook](https://facebook.com/connectcascadelocks) (facebook.com/connectcascadelocks) the planning team kept continuous contact with more than 150 followers, providing updates on events, outside references, and media coverage.

#### *In the Community*

Although developing a digital presence was important, face time was also critical to building public support for the plan. Celilo Planning Studio formed two advisory committees, a Cascade Locks Advisory Committee (CLAC) made of community members, and a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of representatives from regional partner groups. The planning team conducted stakeholder interviews with all committee members, and participants were asked to review plan elements, providing local knowledge and technical guidance (see LTR[Stallman].pdf).

#### *Additional Outreach*

To ensure everyone in the community heard about the project, Celilo Planning Studio canvassed at the grocery store, attended City Council and Port Commission meetings and community events, and posted flyers around town. An infographic was developed which presented the economic benefits of trails in a fun and approachable way (see MIS[2].pdf). Press releases to local newspapers and blogs resulted in outstanding media coverage through outlets both in the Gorge and Portland, including *The Hood River News*, *The Skamania County Pioneer*, *OregonLive*, and *BikePortland.org* (see MIS[4].pdf - MIS[7].pdf).

Celilo Planning Studio also presented findings from the Trail User Survey at the Oregon Active Transportation Summit, a conference of transportation professionals and local politicians held in Salem, Oregon.

#### **The Final Plan (file name: ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf)**

When completed, *Connect Cascade Locks* included recommendations in three critical areas:

- Trail Stewardship
- Business & Marketing
- Trails & Trailhead Amenities.

#### *Trail Stewardship* (Chapter 3 in ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf)

From case studies research, the team found that volunteer trail groups are a vital component in successful recreational trail management. In light of the limited budgets of federal, state, and local agencies, Celilo Planning Studio recommended the creation of a community trail non-profit to oversee the implementation of the *Connect Cascade Locks* plan (see LTR[Burditt].pdf). This "Trail Care Group" would continue communication among stakeholders, apply for grants, and lead trail building and maintenance parties. The group has already started to take shape. Working under the umbrella of the local International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) chapter, the Northwest Trails Alliance, the group has already hosted volunteer trail building and beach cleanup events (see Image3.jpg; LTR[Pheanis].pdf).

### *Business & Marketing* (Chapter 4 in ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf)

Developing business opportunities for Cascade Locks was a central component of the plan. The purpose of these recommendations was to identify opportunities to expand existing businesses and attract new businesses. Some new business recommendations include a brewpub, food carts, a local fish market, new lodging options, and recreational equipment rentals.

Additionally, the plan includes recommendations for creating a welcoming atmosphere for visitors and businesses. Celilo Planning Studio recommended the initiation of a Cascade Locks ambassador program, an improved online marketing presence, and a workshop for existing businesses to inform employees about local trails.

### *Trails & Trailhead Amenities* (Chapter 5 in ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf)

The recommendations in the Trails & Trailhead Amenities section largely focus on infrastructure improvements. The most important recommendation in this section was the "Trail Hub Model." The intent of the Trail Hub was to draw visitors into a central location downtown to find information about the trails and businesses. Users would be able to park their bike or car and access the surrounding trails, stopping at the businesses before and after their adventure.

## **Tools**

To make the plan actionable, these recommendations are listed as action items in an Implementation Matrix (Chapter 7 in ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf), along with responsible groups and time frames for completion. Acknowledging that the community is strapped for resources, the plan also includes several tools to assist ordinary citizens in implementing the plan:

- Case studies of rural trail towns in and outside of Oregon that have reaped economic benefits from trails (see AppendixA-CaseStudies.pdf).
- A Grant Toolbox including a guide to writing grants and a list of relevant grants (see AppendixB-GrantToolbox.pdf).
- Maps of existing and proposed trails, including a walking map of downtown to be used on kiosks at trailheads (see AppendixH-Trail&DowntownMaps.pdf).
- A wayfinding plan to improve signage and help visitors find both new trails and relevant businesses (see Chapter 5 of ConnectCascadeLocksPlan.pdf).

A total budget of \$2,000 to complete the planning process was supported in full by the Port of Cascade Locks, although the client indicated that the value to the community of the plan was closer to \$100,000 worth of labor and product.

## Implementation

*Connect Cascade Locks* has now been adopted by the Port Commission and the city's Tourism and Downtown Revitalisation Steering Committee. The Planning Commission recommended in September that the City Council adopt the trail plan into the city's Comprehensive Plan. At a November update for the Port Commission (see MIS[1].pdf), Port of Cascade Locks employee Holly Howell reported many steps the community has taken to implement the action items listed in the Implementation Matrix (see LTR[Daughtry].pdf). The city has hosted several new events, including the Double Cross Cyclocross Race (see Image5.jpg) and the Volkswalk Columbia River Gorge Biennial Classic, bringing more than 1,000 visitors for day and overnight trips. The Port has also installed new trail signs according to the wayfinding plan, and built a new 18-hole disc golf course at the Industrial Park.

The Cascade Locks business community has also taken steps to implement the plan. In the spring of 2013 the city's Tourism Committee will host a symposium to teach local employees about recreational opportunities in the community. The Port is negotiating with a new microbrewery, Thunder Island Brewing, to begin making batches of beer in one of the Port's industrial buildings starting in 2013. A Native American Fish Market and a new coffee stand will break ground this winter, and the Pacific Crest Pub, which has been for sale for years, has reopened under new ownership with an expanded menu and hours.

Several grant applications are currently being submitted to the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT). If funding is awarded, the City and the Port hope to collaborate to construct a Trail Hub in downtown, including public restrooms, a bike work stand, and updated maps directing visitors to trailheads and local businesses. A separate grant has been submitted to construct a bicycle and pedestrian railroad overpass connecting the downtown Trail Hub to the Marine Park below.

Cascade Locks has seen some early success, and the enthusiasm in the community has caught on in neighboring cities, as evidenced by grant applications for Trail Hubs in the Gorge communities of Troutdale and Mosier (see LTR[Kloos].pdf). The influence of the plan is even reaching other corners of the globe: two Australian communities hosted an economic development symposium in the fall of 2012 at which one of the Celilo Planning Studio team members was the keynote speaker.

## Conclusion

Although the recommendations in *Connect Cascade Locks* are unique to the community, the challenges Cascade Locks faces are not unique. Many rural communities in Oregon have faced an inflection point where a change in industry or

land management has forced them to rethink their future. In case studies the team found that many small towns in Oregon and elsewhere have chosen eco-tourism, or recreational development, as a strategy to buffer their economy. Becoming a destination does not have to mean sacrificing the town to outsiders. In choosing to develop a tourism economy, plan participants recognized that while developing the town for visitors *can* make a town more liveable, making the town a great place to live *will* make it a great place to visit too.