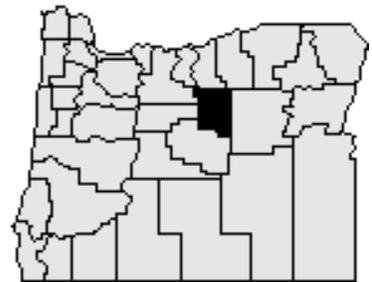


Economic Impact and Facilities Analysis for Fossil and Wheeler County, Oregon

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Rural Studies Program
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“The various towns and communities (22) that have made up Wheeler County have struggled with each other, with general population trends, with industrialization, with modernized transportation, and with unique, internal problems. In retrospect, one can safely point to one factor that preserved a town, namely, its school facility.” Jack Steiwer¹

Introduction

Resources that are available through government and private foundations for community development projects are stretched very thin and, at the same time, the needs for that funding are growing in communities across Oregon and the U.S. Organizations and individuals are becoming even more deliberate as they consider funding projects. They are searching for the proposals that are most likely to contribute to the social and economic well-being of communities well into the future. Within this context, the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) contracted with the Oregon State University Extension Service (OSU) to study the Wheeler County economy and the options within Fossil, Oregon to invest in existing or new facilities.

Goal

The goal of the study is to describe how each option to construct or improve public or quasi-public facilities in Fossil might contribute to the economic resilience of Fossil and Wheeler County for many years.

Approach

Bruce Sorte, Community Economist, led the project for OSU. The project objectives are:

- 1) profile the current Wheeler County economy and project future opportunities and risks,
- 2) assess the capacity of the current public facilities, such as the fairgrounds, public buildings, quasi-public facilities which serve community needs, school facilities, and non-profit facilities, which all vie for public resources to support the current economy; and those facilities ability to adapt to the future (next 20 years) economic environment,
- 3) estimate the economic impacts of two or three improvement projects comparing the potential benefits and costs,
- 4) summarize the findings in a report of approximately ten pages and a PowerPoint presentation of approximately ten slides that will be available for comment by the Wheeler County Commissioners, OCF and any other interested parties prior to being finalized, and
- 5) make or support two presentations of the findings in settings like a community-wide meeting, Commission meeting, and/or OCF board meeting.

¹ Fussner, F Smith 1975. Glimpses of Wheeler County’s Past; An Early History of North Central Oregon, Chapter 4 Communities: Past and Present. Binford & Mort; Portland, Oregon. p. 15.

These objectives were accomplished by studying publically available and proprietary economic information and seeking local citizens' ideas. Mr. Sorte conducted 22 personal interviews and then made printed survey forms available throughout the County at businesses and public facilities. Mr. Sorte and Tom Bowerman toured the facilities in Fossil on July 6, 2012. From the interviews, economic data analysis and tour, we created three scenarios and asked community members and Oregon State University colleagues to review the scenarios. After adjusting the scenarios to incorporate the community member's and academic/agency reviewers' comments, Mr. Sorte used an economic input-output model called IMPLAN (for *IM* *Impact* *PLAN*ning) to estimate the net annual benefits from each possible project. The initial findings will be reported to the community members by revising and distributing this report.

Certainly, it was not possible for Mr. Sorte to gain a sufficient understanding of the history, people, and issues in a few short visits to make comprehensive suggestions. That would take at least decades. These recommendations need to be considered by Wheeler County folks to glean the useful portions of each suggestion. Mr. Sorte's outsider status did allow him to review the facilities and the programs in Wheeler County without any 'horse in the race' and with his experience working with other rural counties around Oregon. He tried to dispassionately observe Wheeler County's current situation to gauge how effective it may be in meeting the economic future.

Economic Profile

Since well before Wheeler County was created in 1899, the region had a natural resource based economy. It prospered in terms of population growth and business establishments until the middle of the last century when it suffered a series of natural and business setbacks.² "Following World War II, there were numerous small lumber mills that were very short lived: Spoons, Hudspeth, Silver Creek, Stallings, to name a few. These mills helped maintain the population after the war, but upon facing the end of privately owned timber stands, and their own financial inadequacy to compete with larger corporate mills for government timber claims, they either closed their doors or moved the mill and employees, lock, stock, and barrel to another locale."³ After the Kinzua mill closed in 1978, the employment opportunities and the likelihood that the population decline that began in 1950's⁴ could be reversed by market forces alone became remote.

The following discussion is frank, as it describes the level of economic distress that Wheeler County has experienced. Businesses, government officials, and other concerned folks are pushing against some very strong events outside the County that are affecting their economy and are proving to be more effective than might be expected given current economic trends. It will be helpful as we discuss how to use facility and other initiatives to rebuild Wheeler County's economic resilience or its ability to bounce back in terms of jobs and population from past and future economic shocks to understand these trends in some detail.

² Fussner, F Smith 1975. *Glimpses of Wheeler County's Past; An Early History of North Central Oregon*. Binford & Mort; Portland, Oregon.

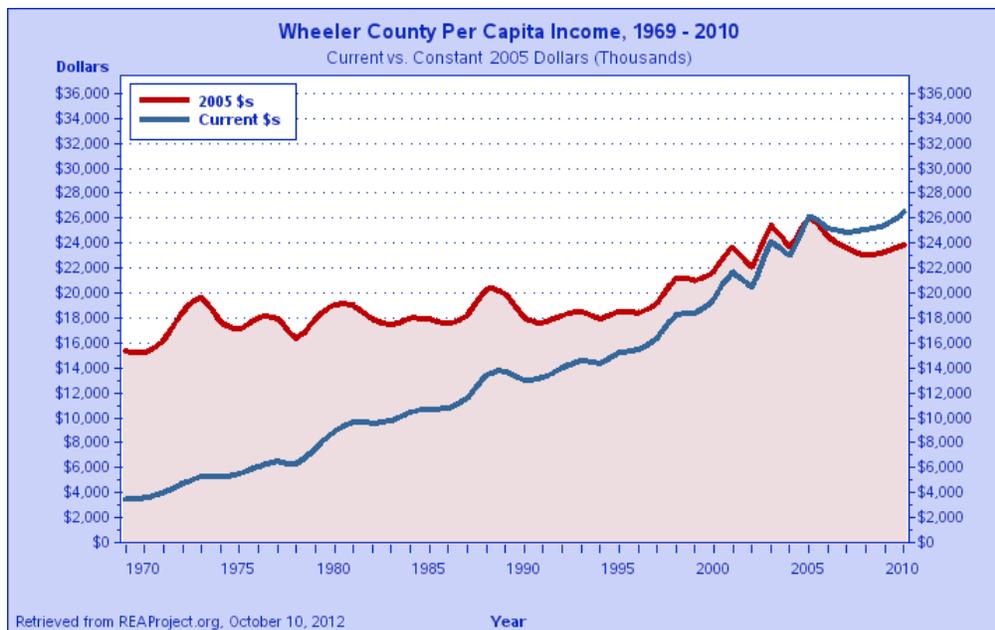
³ *Ibid.* p. 16.

⁴ Forstall, Richard L. (ed.), *Population of Counties by Decennial Census: 1900 to 1990*. U.S. Bureau of Census: <http://www.census.gov/population/cencounts/or190090.txt>.

The metrics that are described and analyzed below only explain part of the changes that have taken place. On their own they would not be sufficient to understand how Wheeler County has retained most of its keystone sectors – schools, churches, banks, government offices, etc. The quality of life in Wheeler County, including its natural, social and cultural assets, have cushioned Wheeler County from many of the extreme effects that the economic shocks might have been expected if the economic variables are considered on their own. However, as the median age of County residents (48.1 years) increases in relation to Oregon’s (36.3 years),⁵ as ranches consolidate, and as young folks find it progressively more difficult to offset reduced economic opportunities with the other cultural and amenity benefits of Wheeler County that contribute positively to their families’ well-being, current trends will persist and may accelerate.

Wheeler County’s per capita income has grown over the last 40 years as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Wheeler County Per Capita Income, 1969-2010.⁶



While per capita income grew, it did not keep pace with national, state, or regional trends (per Table 2). It grew by almost 60%, however Nonmetro Eastern Oregon income grew by almost 80%, Oregon income grew by over 100% and U.S. per capita income grew by almost 120%.⁷

Table 2. Real Per Capita Income Percentage Growth 1969 to 2010.

⁵ City-data.com: http://www.city-data.com/county/Wheeler_County-OR.html

⁶ Pacific Northwest Regional Economic Analysis Project (PNREAP). <http://oregon.reaproject.org/>

⁷ Ibid.

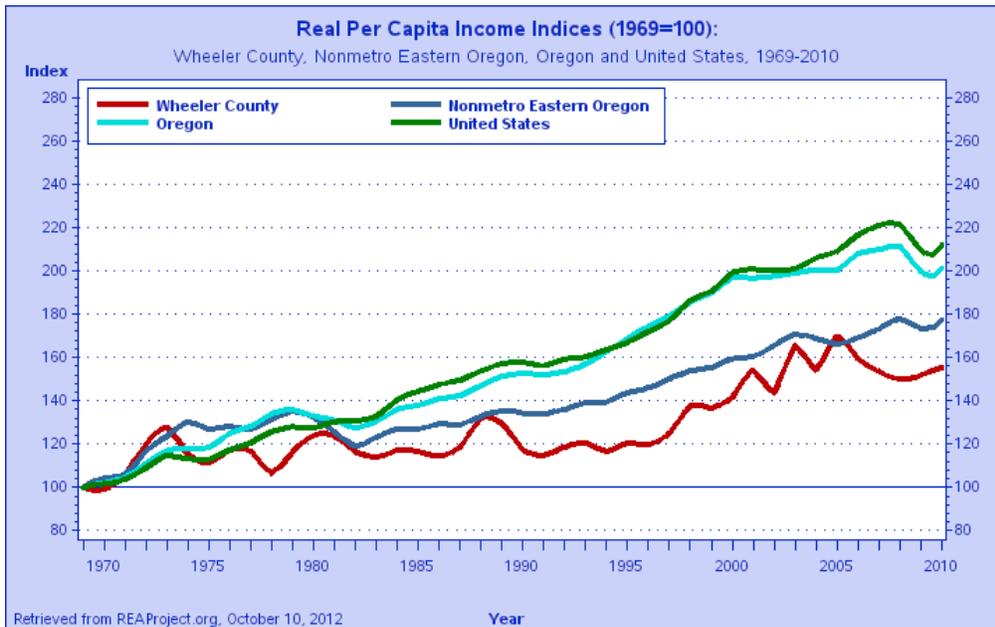
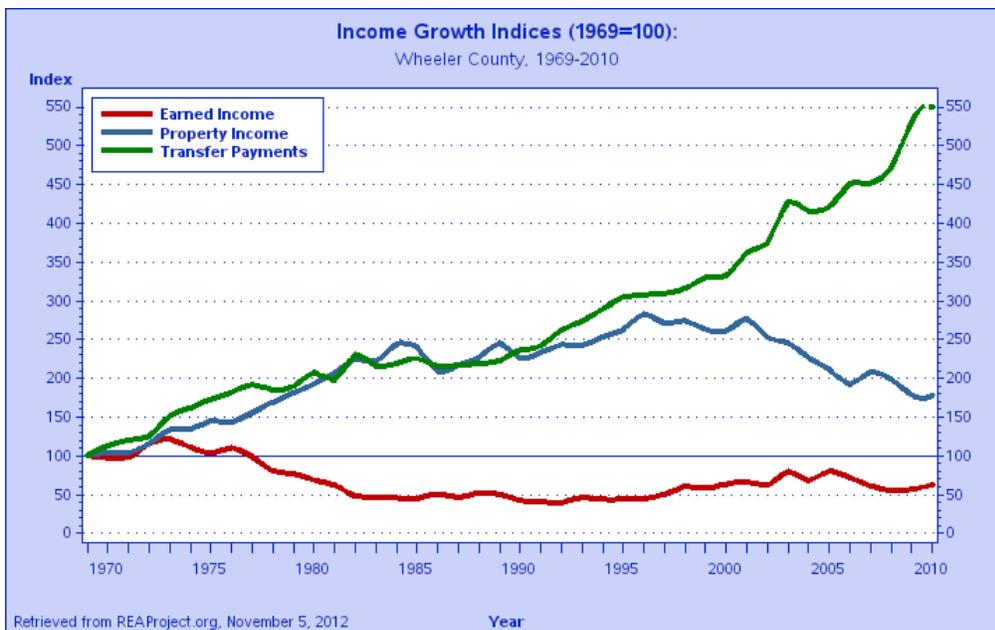


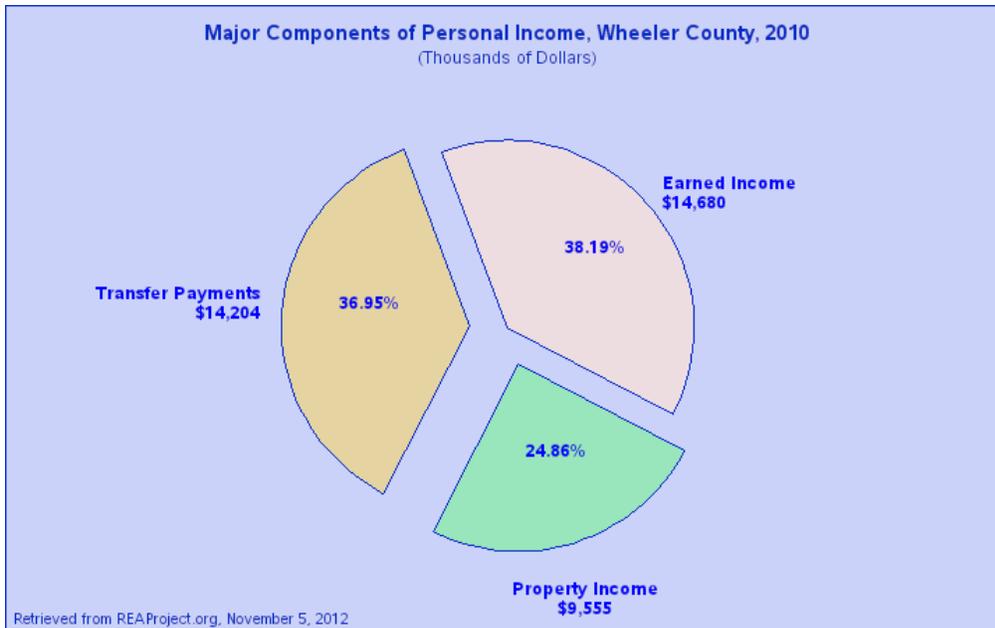
Table 3 shows that since Kinzua started reducing production in the mid-1970s, all of the growth in personal income has come from transfer payments (e.g. Social Security) and property income (e.g. land leases). Since 2002, all the growth has come from transfer payments. Table 4 shows the percentage of income provide by each type of income.⁸

Table 3. Income Growth Indices 1969 to 2010.



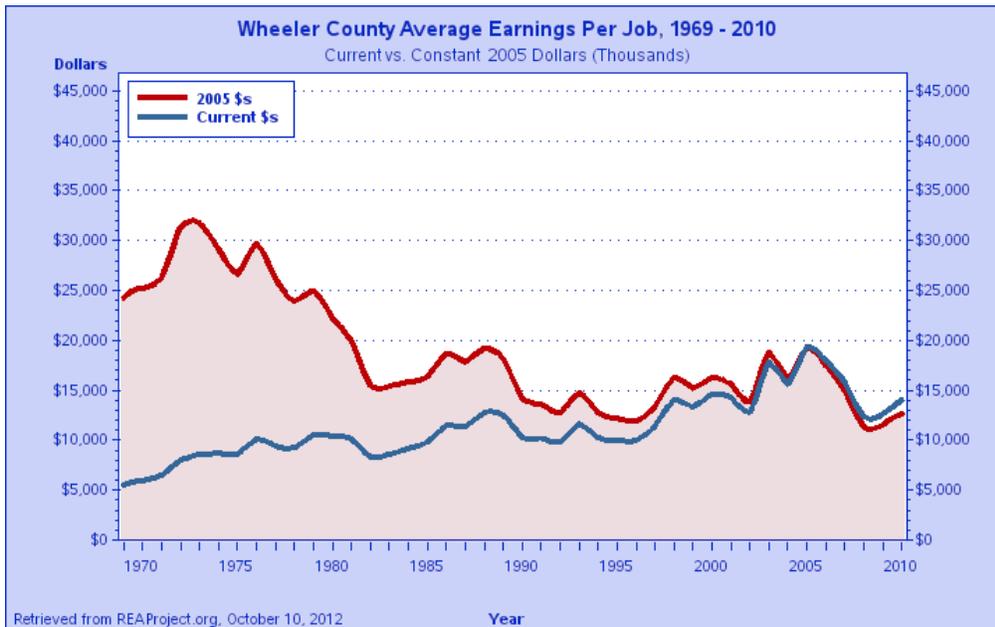
⁸ Ibid

Table 4. Major Components of Personal Income, Wheeler County, 2010



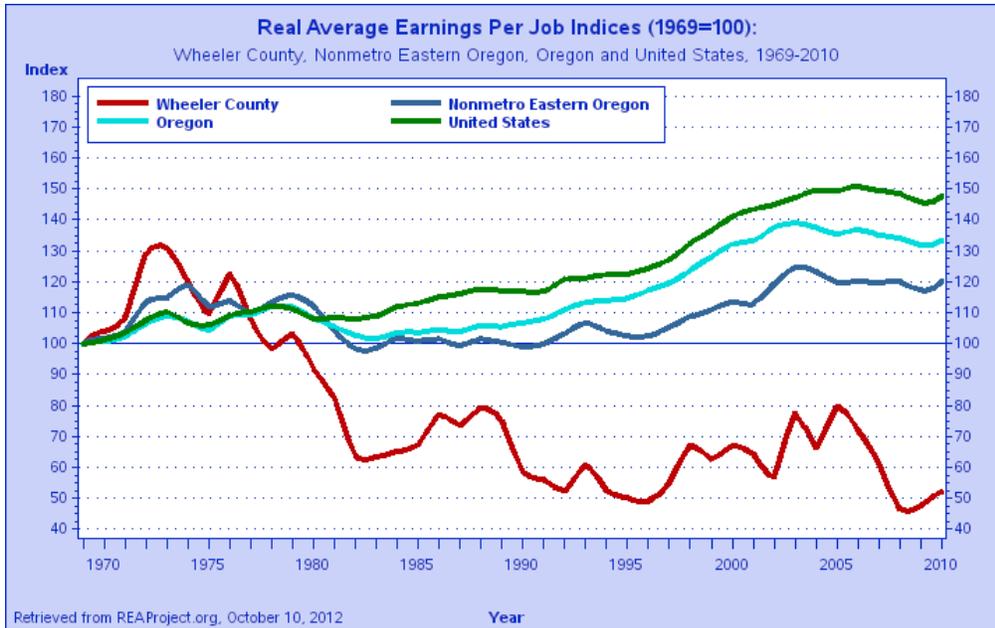
The declining portion of income attributable to earned income is understandable due to the reduced employment opportunities and reduced average earnings per job for those jobs that remain. Table 5 shows the average earnings per job in real dollars and constant 2005 dollars, while Table 6 shows the real average earnings per job as they have changed in relation to the U.S., Oregon, and the Nonmetro Eastern Oregon region.⁹

Table 5. Wheeler County Average Earnings Per Job 1969 to 2010.



⁹ Ibid

Table 6. Real Average Earnings Per Job Compared to U.S., Oregon, and Nonmetro Eastern Oregon 1969 to 2010



Wheeler County economy's three main economic engines are agriculture, government, and – closely allied to government – health and social services. Table 7 shows the Wheeler County economic sectors aggregated at the two digit level of the North American Industrial Classification (NAICS). These estimates were made using the 2010 data from an IMPLAN (or *IM*Impact *PLAN*ning model) purchased from the Minnesota Implan Group. Using the IMPLAN model, we analyzed what portion of the economy was attributable to the Ag. Forestry Fishing & Hunting sector (27.7%), Government and non NAICS or miscellaneous sector (17.5%), and Health & social services sector (8.0%). Since the percentage of the economy that is attributable to these three basic sectors is approximately twice as much as the percentage of the economy directly involved in adding value in those sectors, any change, positive or negative, in the basic sectors not only affects those sectors, they transmit an effect through the rest of the economy about equal to what happens to them. An additional dollar or a lost dollar in those three basic sectors adds or reduces the service sector portion of the economy by another dollar when the effects are added-up across all the service sectors like Retail Trade.

Table 7. Wheeler County Employment, Percentage of Employment, Sales, and Net County Product (Income) – IMPLAN Model & 2010 Data

<i>Description</i>	<i>Full & Part-time Jobs</i>	<i>Percentage of Employment</i>	<i>Sales (\$)</i>	<i>Net County Product (\$)</i>
Total	724	100.0%	60,597,277	30,855,315
Ag, Forestry, Fish & Hunting	201	27.7%	12,439,290	3,628,662
Utilities	2	0.2%	471,311	338,102
Construction	24	3.3%	2,301,830	579,421
Manufacturing	9	1.2%	1,613,964	146,223
Wholesale Trade	7	0.9%	1,024,875	767,756
Retail trade	54	7.5%	2,542,978	1,407,869
Transportation & Warehousing	14	2.0%	772,139	583,481
Information	33	4.6%	10,405,088	4,934,589
Finance & insurance	12	1.7%	1,449,081	312,925
Real estate & rental	52	7.2%	9,254,960	7,674,911
Professional- scientific & tech svcs	27	3.7%	1,190,731	648,618
Administrative & waste services	12	1.6%	472,429	153,527
Educational svcs (private)	16	2.3%	634,799	274,970
Health & social services	58	8.0%	4,262,205	2,000,446
Arts- entertainment & recreation	10	1.4%	633,758	252,624
Accommodation & food services	42	5.8%	1,982,559	842,280
Other services	24	3.4%	2,165,915	597,565
Government & non NAICs	127	17.5%	6,979,365	5,711,347

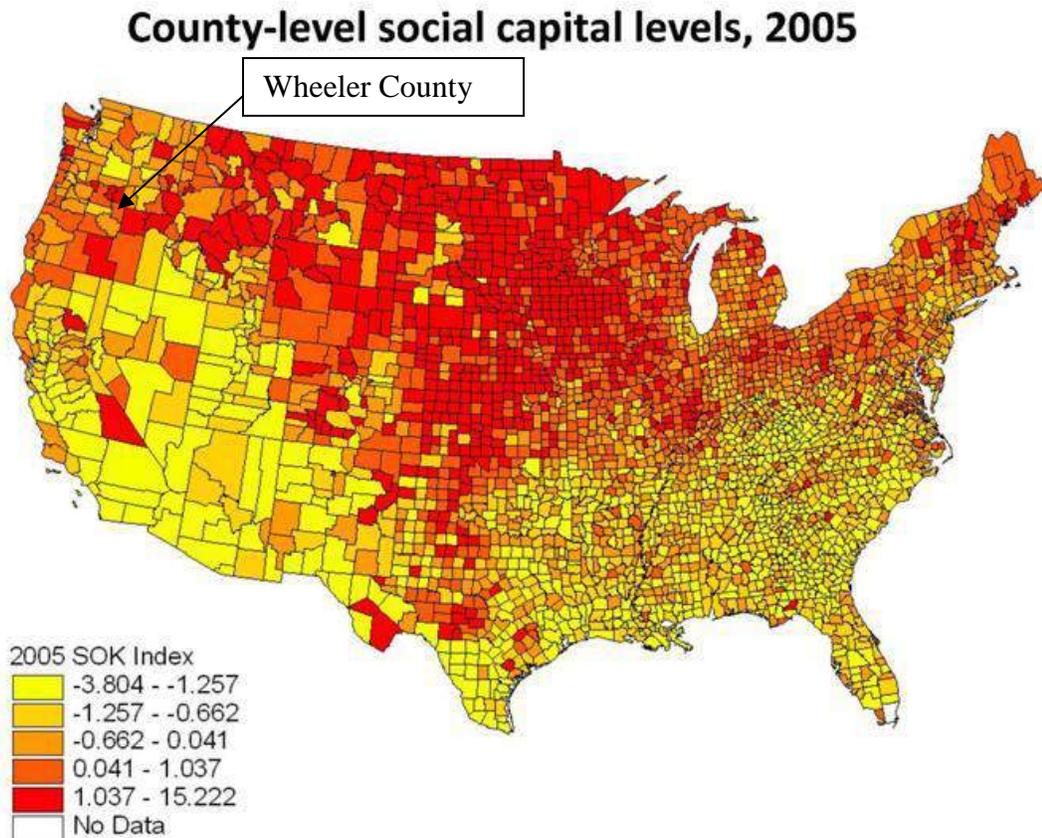
While the metrics above show the economic distress through which Wheeler County has survived and describe the components of the economy, they only partially reflect the quality of life in Wheeler County. There are many quality of life or well-being measures that are essential to understanding Wheeler County. Even economists are beginning to acknowledge and research variables that measure elements of quality of life.

“Previous research has identified the demographic characteristics and stated motivations of new rural residents in the northern Great Plains (Cordes et al. 1996; Leistritz and Sell 1998; Leistritz et al. 2001; Burke and Edelman 2007) and elsewhere (Stinner and Van Loon 1992; Karlgaard 2004; Coffman and Athan 2005). These studies strongly suggest that in-migrants to nonmetropolitan areas do indeed attach a great deal of significance to qualitative social, cultural and environmental characteristics of localities when determining the desirability of migration.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Cantrell, Randy and Cheryl Burhart-Kriesel, Bruce Johnson, Charlotte Narjes and Rebecca Vogt 2008. *Moving to the Rural Great Plains: Point of Origin Differences in the Decision Making Process*. Center for Great Plains Studies University of Nebraska Lincoln. Great Plains Research 18 (Fall 2008): 155-63.

One measure of those characteristics is social capital - the relationships or networks that people develop to facilitate economic and social well-being. Wheeler County has very positive social capital, depicted in Illustration 1, when social capital is measured as an index of variables like religious organizations, public and private associations, nonprofits, voter turn-out, and response to census questionnaires as they relate to total population.

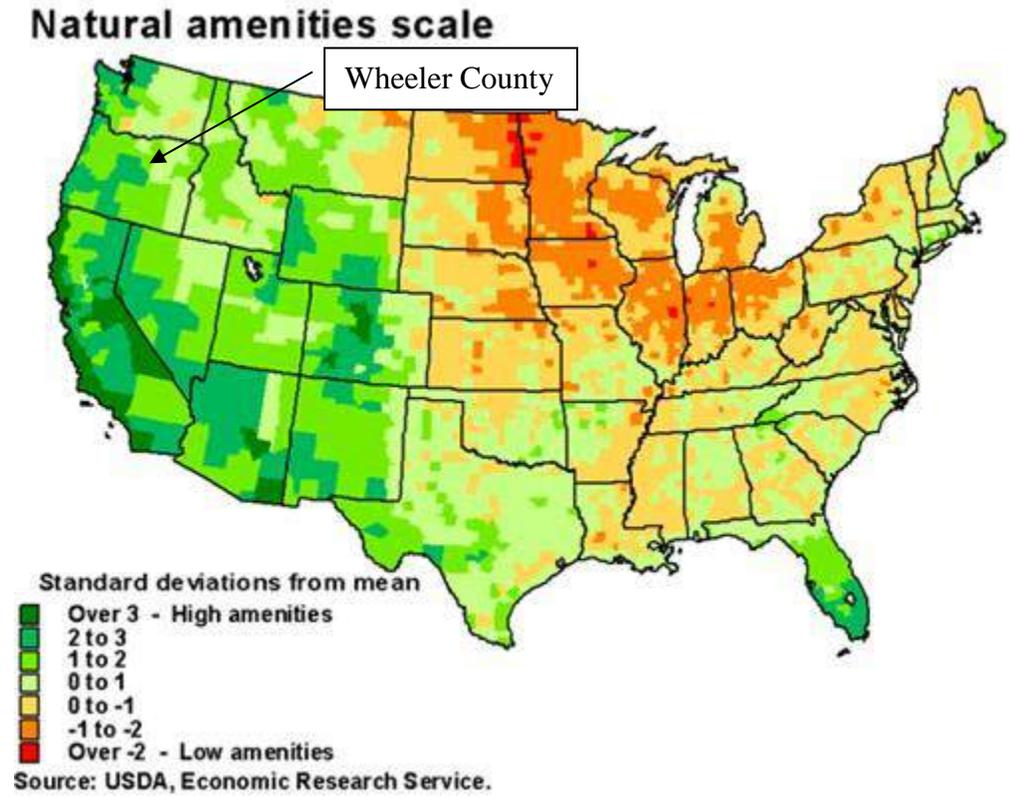
Illustration 1. Social Capital Levels, 2005¹¹



¹¹ Rupasingha, Anil and Stephan J. Goetz, "US County-Level Social Capital Data, 1990-2005." The Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, Penn State University, University Park, PA, 2008.

Well-being can also be associated with natural amenities and again Wheeler County, as shown in Illustration 2, is above average. “The natural amenities scale is a measure of the physical characteristics of a county area that enhance the location as a place to live. The scale was constructed by combining six measures of climate, topography, and water area that reflect environmental qualities most people prefer. These measures are warm winter, winter sun, temperate summer, low summer humidity, topographic variation, and water area. The data are available for counties in the lower 48 States...”¹²

Illustration 2. Map of Distance (Standard Deviation) from the Mean for Natural Amenities by County



¹² McGranahan, David 1999/updated 2012. Natural Amenities Scale. USDA Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/natural-amenities-scale.aspx>

Community Experience and Valued Features

Mr. Sorte visited with 24 Wheeler County residents with extensive knowledge in one or more parts of the economy who also had experience with community projects and issues.

The questions Mr. Sorte asked follow. Questions 1-4 were designed to learn the experience or background of the person being interviewed, what attributes of the community that we should be sure to protect and strengthen if possible, and how the interviewee expected world events to affect Wheeler County in the future. Questions 5-7 specifically addressed facilities and their associated opportunities. The last question was to help identify one or more changes that could be made in Wheeler County that could strengthen the interviewee's resolve to stay or ride out even tougher times in the County.

The most frequent, and in some cases most intense responses, to the questions are aggregated into a few comments and noted under each question.

1) *How long have you lived/visited/owned a business in this area and how do you spend your time related to Wheeler County?*

Ninety percent of the interviewees had resided in the County for more than ten years and most for decades. All interviewees volunteered, worked in a public service job or helped with a business that was engaged with a large portion of the community and people outside Wheeler County.

2) *What has changed for the better and worse during your time in Wheeler County?*

Better – Health care, industrial park, community center, some new people, Paleo Institute, and “Can’t think of a good thing”

Worse – Declining school programs, mental health services, old person’s economy, lack of trust in governing, uncertainty of federal land policies, Paleo Center has had minimal impact

3) *What will the future be like for the County?*

Schools will struggle to maintain programs, federal government programs will be uncertain, taxes may increase, communication technologies may improve even more, and maybe the County will need to consider consolidating at least some services with other counties

4) *Are there other counties or communities that you admire and from which you think Fossil and Wheeler County could learn?*

Other towns were mentioned (Redmond, Sisters, Condon) however not consistently. The other towns were primarily used by interviewees to emphasize that the interviewee wanted more revitalization of facilities and/or wanted to encourage or discourage (both points of view were equally expressed) becoming more tourist or lifestyle based.

5) *What are the more important facilities and infrastructure or systems that currently exist or are needed to contribute to the economic success of the County?*

Schools, community center, clinic, senior center, Paleo center, fairgrounds, one good multi-use conference center, mercantile, roads, some concern over water yet what was mostly represented was an uncertainty over the current status of the water system

6) *Are there untapped opportunities in the County related to facilities or other economic development initiatives?*

Marketing Wheeler County externally and to visitors who come to the county, improved housing, and a meat processing facility

7) *What percentage of improvement projects should or could be locally funded and what percentage do you think it is appropriate to ask the state or foundations to fund?*

Zero – County residents are too economically stressed to provide funds for economic initiatives or facility renovations

8) *If you had one wish for a change in Wheeler County what would it be?*

Better school facilities and “put youth forward,” more people 0-40 years old, affordable housing, fairgrounds professional/meeting facility, better utilization of existing facilities, and more wind power development

Retaining current residents

When so much of what affects communities today is determined on a global scale, communities’ private and public sector goals of the past like economic growth or even stability are progressively less likely to be achieved. Communities are now trying to build businesses, organizations, and institutions that can take a shock of any type, intensity or duration and bounce back quickly. Although the community and economy may be much different after than before the shock, the population, number of jobs, earnings per job, and quality of life would return to pre-shock levels in a resilient community.

Economic resilience relies on community members' skills, knowledge/history, and loyalty to a community to persist through tough times and to find the energy and resources to bounce back after economic shocks. Resilient communities create and maintain critical or keystone businesses and institutions on which they rely and which, if removed, can cause the community to decline. Those keystone sectors can be different for every community, yet they typically include places to gather, obtain help or support from financial to health services, earn a living, and purchase basic needs.

All three incorporated communities in Wheeler County have retained more keystone businesses and institutions than might have been expected given the number of economic shocks the County has experienced over the last 35 years. In Fossil, where the majority of the interviews were conducted, residents discussed most of the businesses and agencies; however they focused on the Asher Community Health Center, Haven House Retirement Center, Glover Senior (Community) Center, Fossil Elementary and Wheeler High School, and the Mercantile as keystones. There was not a check list provided during the interviews and, if there had been, most of the interviewees would probably have included the bank, auto dealership, County court house/government, fairgrounds, restaurants, etc. (which they may take for granted, are stable, and very important).

The first step in an economic development strategy is to retain current people and businesses. Businesses know that it is easier and less expensive to keep an existing customer than to recruit a new one. The same holds true for communities.

To retain residents and their commitment to work through economic shocks, the keystone sectors/facilities will need to be maintained and, where possible, improved. Examples include making sure there is a clear line of succession or plan for replacing managers or administrators of those facilities, expanding capacity before it is needed, and improving transitional and long term housing opportunities to minimize commuting, especially for employees whose incomes are modest and for whom commuting costs become a major portion of their budget. Also, cross training managers and employees so they can help, even across businesses and agencies when illness, injury, or just a need for a few days of vacation can really improve productivity and satisfaction of those folks with the community. Being tenacious with local, state, and federal agencies that affect access (e.g. roads, internet, phone, public transport) to the County because remoteness is the greatest obstacle that Wheeler County faces in recruiting businesses and people is critical, as well.

Recruiting new residents

Recruiting new residents may become a matter of survival soon based on the economic profile discussion above and the American Community Survey estimate that the median age in Wheeler County is 54.6 years and the Oregon median age is 38.10 for the 2006-2010 five year period.¹³ Betting on the global market to change, on some entrepreneur to discover a large business that works best in Wheeler County or on tourists to discover Wheeler County in sufficient numbers to reverse current economic trends is a very big gamble. It is difficult to foresee a scenario that will cause any of those things to happen. Although there are not guarantees of success, a surer bet may be to invest Wheeler County resources, with limited help from foundations and government agencies, to support businesses and initiatives that may not be self-supporting on their own yet are essential to building economic resilience in the County.

Recent research from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln can help narrow the alternatives for how to recruit new residents. After moving closer to relatives, job opportunities are the primary reason rural people move to another rural place.¹⁴ So, recruiting people to Wheeler County from other rural parts of Oregon or the U.S. will be difficult, at least until the business sectors are strengthened. Most of the recruitment opportunities are likely to come from metro areas.

“Persons moving from metropolitan counties are looking for a less congested place to live, a safer place to live, a simpler pace of life, and a lower cost of living. Labor force recruitment efforts aimed at larger metropolitan areas should emphasize such amenities along with key structural elements such as the quality of schools and the availability of health care. Certainly, job creation and business retention and attraction strategies are essential to attracting new residents. However, as demonstrated in this (Nebraska) study, community quality of life amenities can be the factors that ultimately lead persons to choose to move to a specific rural community.”¹⁵

Wheeler County has many of the quality of life features already. While they are necessary, they have not been sufficient for recruitment purposes. How much health care affects decisions to relocate to rural places emphasizes the importance of maintaining and strengthening the human resources and facilities of the Health Center and Haven House.

The economy is quickly transitioning to a knowledge and creativity based labor force. Education and diversity of people/ideas are at the core of that transition. Parents, students, and employers are particularly demanding in terms of school facilities, faculty experience/approach, and curriculum.

¹³ Oregon Explorer – Communities Reporter 2012. Oregon State University Rural Studies Program. <http://oe.oregonexplorer.info/rural/CommunitiesReporter/>

¹⁴ Cantrell, Randy and Cheryl Burhart-Kriesel, Bruce Johnson, Charlotte Narjes and Rebecca Vogt 2008. *Moving to the Rural Great Plains: Point of Origin Differences in the Decision Making Process*. Center for Great Plains Studies University of Nebraska Lincoln. Great Plains Research 18 (Fall 2008): 155-63.

¹⁵ Ibid

People moving from metro areas are adept at evaluating their options. They have a number of tools available to make those assessments like City-Data.com and Sperling's Best Places. It can be helpful to Google those sites and imagine how a family considering a move to Wheeler County may weigh the information.

An example is where Fossil (Wheeler County's ranking is similar) is on City-Data's top 100 lists.

Fossil on our top lists:

- #87 on the list of "Top 100 cities with declining populations from 2000 to 2008"
- #16 on the list of "Top 101 counties with the lowest number of births per 1000 residents 2000-2003"
- #19 on the list of "Top 101 counties with the largest number of children under 18 without health insurance coverage in 2000"
- #46 on the list of "Top 101 counties with the largest number of people without health insurance coverage in 2000"
- #86 on the list of "Top 101 counties with highest percentage of residents voting for 3rd party candidates in the 2004 Presidential Election"¹⁶

Issues like children's health care can seem quite difficult, yet Wheeler County has already made significant progress in this area for the whole population. Just modest community investment (e.g. providing basic health care insurance for all the children in Wheeler County), given the size of Wheeler County's population, can move the metric quite a bit.



Focusing Facility Investments

Considering the facilities in Wheeler County, and particularly Fossil, the challenge becomes managing opportunity cost as much as total cost. The projects need to be prioritized with a focus on first retaining and then recruiting new people and businesses.

Fossil has an excess of square footage that is widely dispersed across the community. Based on the discussion to this point, the following criteria can be considered to prioritize projects. A proposed project needs to:

- support both retention and recruitment of residents and businesses,
- distinguish the community from other Oregon and U.S. communities,
- have a low opportunity cost, which is considered before total cost, and

¹⁶ City-Data.com 2012. <http://www.city-data.com/city/Fossil-Oregon.html>

- minimize long term operating and maintenance costs through higher initial location, design, and/or construction costs and optimize the flexibility of total space constructed or renovated.

Next Steps

Consider contracting with a marketing firm that has a solid track record helping counties in similar circumstances. The scope of work can initially be limited to surveying current and potential residents to measure their preferences for facility improvements in Wheeler County from an initial list developed in Wheeler County.

The list might start with the schools. It is important for Wheeler County residents to visit schools in rural and urban areas and then do a frank assessment of the existing schools based on their visits and the criteria noted above. Consolidating and/or rebuilding schools locally, as noted in the opening quote by Mr. Steiwer, may be the single most effective investment for retaining and recruiting residents and businesses.

Many communities with excess space and dispersed facilities have worked to concentrate their efforts in parts of towns where residents and visitors can reach businesses and government services with easy parking and minimal walking. Mapping the keystone sectors, establishing a community locus, and planning how to move the keystone sectors closer together could be part of the list to be tested by the marketing consultants, as well.

Also, on the list there needs to be a careful review of access points for gaining information about Wheeler County, both remotely and on the ground. As an example, upon entering Fossil, how does a visitor learn about the events, businesses, services, housing etc.? Single point and as close to 24/7 access for access to a contact could be the goal.

Along with developing an understanding of the retention and recruitment “market,” Wheeler County might benefit from a more detailed understanding of how it has been able to retain keystone businesses while other communities have not been so successful. It is important to learn where those businesses’ thresholds are in terms of market, profitability, facilities, and labor force which might force them to close. One of the more successful and structured economic development programs is called Business Retention and Expansion. It does not create a “grand plan” or vision initially, but instead it identifies ways that business need help and, on a project by project basis, address problems or needs that can pull a business back from the threshold where costs exceed revenues.

In addition, at least the economic model we have of Wheeler County shows very high levels of leakage from the County for all types of purchases. There are business practices (e.g. employee profit sharing, shipping, return policies, and price negotiation directly or through a local “auction site”) that can reduce those leakages.

Government and private foundation funding sources for health and other social services may continue to decline, possibly at an increasing rate. Given Wheeler County's higher than average age, and the resulting reliance on transfer payments, that decline will disproportionately affect Wheeler County and other rural counties. At the same time, the higher average age and the transfer payments indicate there is a great deal of knowledge and, potentially, time available to substitute volunteer provisions for health and other social services for the fee based services that may be lost. Rural areas have always had a strong volunteer ethic. That ethic now needs to be supplemented with training and equipment that allows those volunteers to access expertise on a global basis.

Competition for residents and businesses has moved from the regional or state level to a national level. Wheeler County is competitive in terms of industrial sites, however, due to its remote location, it probably needs to go well beyond matching other places in terms of industrial sites and reasonable cost of living. Examples of ways Wheeler County could distinguish itself from any other county in Oregon, and the vast majority of counties across the U.S., are to provide land, housing, property tax, or health care incentives to new residents, or at least families with young children. There are housing programs in Oregon and other types of programs from a few counties, particularly in the upper Mid-West, that could be copied and pilot tested in Wheeler County.

This discussion is based primarily on Mr. Sorte's very limited understanding of Wheeler County and requires a great deal more local knowledge and judgment before work begins. Still, after visiting and conducting studies in a number of communities in Oregon and Minnesota that face many of the same issues challenging Wheeler County, he has only observed successes in communities that invested their own resources, as well as outside resources, and attempted some projects that required regular rework and would never be finished.