

Wallowa County At An Economic Threshold

Throughout the western U.S. scenic small towns are being inundated with development and population growth. The average population growth between 2010 and 2019 was 13.3% for small western towns but the percentage of second homes or vacation homes went up 65%. A new cultural mobility by investors, retirees, and tourists has millions of Americans targeting someplace rural and beautiful. These western towns and counties are being loved to death.

For decades Wallowa County quietly dodged the explosive tourist development surge that has hammered other scenic towns (Aspen, Jackson Hole, Park City, and others). The decision by Union Pacific to choose Sun Valley instead of the Wallowa Valley delayed this development. In the fifties and sixties the County's isolated economy was simple: It was farming, ranching, logging, and retail (all the store fronts were filled, no tourist shops) with some government, and a small amount of tourism beginning July 4th and ending on Labor Day. There was one realtor and few vacation rentals. Now the outside media world has found Wallowa County and is shouting monthly to all their readers to come take a look at the Wallowa Valley. One magazine named Joseph as one of the top 10 future Zoom towns in Oregon. A national poll indicated 20 million Americans would consider moving to a rural location.

A research effort funded by the National Institute for Transportation and Communities (GNAR report number 1475) looked at issues affecting small rural western communities resulting from sudden increases in tourism and in-migration. One of the tools used was to use census and employment data and look at "commuter sheds" which, like a water shed, map where residents live versus where they drive to work, resulting in an informative, colorful map display of the commuter paths and the complexity of work life in the western U.S. Workers in the West are driving very long distances to go to work, mainly because they cannot afford the housing where they work. Currently 642 people who work in Wallowa County live outside the County, mirroring trends in the rest of the West.

Young working families in the County need year-round jobs that pay a living wage and seasonal tourism does not provide that. There is a path that would bring in families with high disposable income which in turn would stimulate the building trades and development of service businesses, creating year-round employment, I am speaking of Digital Workers. Digital is the economic engine in today's cities, and Remote Digital Workers are the employment wave of the near future. One of my sons, a dual-fuel combustion research engineer, works from his bedroom in Austin, Texas for Caterpillar,

located in the Midwest. He runs complicated computer modeling of new engine designs next to where he sleeps. The other son, a finance CPA for a medical software company, works from a small bedroom administering the financial assets of that mid-sized company; his wife works from another bedroom designing online marketing campaigns for large corporations. Both families have two small children and they earn more and spend more than I ever did.

If you bring these types of workers into the County, they are there the year round and offset the ups and downs of the summer tourist bubble, and they don't leave empty short-term rental houses. They bring their income with them (from wealthy urban areas) which they spend in the local economy on new houses, products, and services. They also have young, active families which helps offset the aging of Wallowa County which has a much higher percentage of persons over 65 than the State of Oregon or other N.W. urban areas.

In the Seattle area digital workers are plentiful, but the acute shortage is skilled tradesmen. Plumbers, electricians, carpenters, construction workers, or really anyone with good hand skills and a responsible attitude are very hard to find, and expensive (median wage \$38.47/Hr.). However, it is the high incomes of the digital workers that finance the good paying trade and construction jobs. There is an essential income transfer from the cutting-edge economy to the support economy and you see it everywhere in the high-tech city. While digital workers would bring needed income and property tax revenues into the county they would also add to the problems that come with development, which means increased pressure on existing infrastructure: roads, water, sewer, fire, police, medical, etc., but that is the nature of economic growth, you can't have growth without the complexity. Some of the physical beauty of the Valley would be lost as the number of buildings grow on the landscape. Remember what the drive between Enterprise and Joseph looked like? It was all farm fields at one time.

One of the most important issues is, would these formerly urban people meld with the ethos of a rural community? Generally these people are not far right conservatives nor far left liberals; mostly they are independents or moderates. Socially they tend to be creative people that get involved in community activities. However, how would they do in an isolated area with hard winters? This is a topic for a different essay.

If the standard of living in the County is to be raised, the economic infusion will have to come from outside the County. Can an influx of digital families be part of this solution? I don't know, but trends indicate it may be coming, so the County needs to start long range planning to guide development in the direction that best preserves the County's way of life.

Roger Hockett grew up in Wallowa County and is retired in Newcastle, Wa. He is a veteran and spent a life designing, crafting, and manufacturing furniture.