

## Community Advisory Team

### Vital Signs Indicators Project

#### Summary Report

April 25, 2008

The Community Advisory Team (CAT) was formed at the end of October, 2007 to assist the Technical Advisory Team (TAT) to select a set of objective measures to assess how well the Columbia Gorge Commission's Management Plan is protecting and/or enhancing the scenic, natural, economic, cultural, and recreational resources of the National Scenic Area (the "SNECRs"). The Commission intends to use these measures to: 1) periodically gauge the condition of the Gorge for the benefit of policy makers and the general public, and 2) subsequently develop additional high level agency performance indicators in Phase Two to assess its performance in achieving the goals and objectives of the Act through the Management Plan.

Team members were selected by the Commission's Assessment Committee after reviewing solicited applications. Those who served on the Team included articulate, opinionated, and knowledgeable representatives from diverse disciplines, political views, and geographical areas.

One of the CAT's most important responsibilities was to provide feedback regarding the importance and understandability of the indicators proposed by the technical team, once we developed a working understanding of the TAT's mission. This in turn allowed greater consolidation among proposed indicators to avert confusion and perceived duplication by the public. Our team met repeatedly and collaboratively with the TAT and shared a dynamic and positive relationship with them. Frequently members from our group participated in and contributed to technical sub-group meetings on specialized topics of interest, and the vast majority of all the WIKI postings to the discussion forums of both Advisory Teams have been from CAT members. Almost all of our members remained active and engaged throughout our entire six month tenure, which clearly underscores our intense and collective interest in achieving a successful conclusion to this phase of the Indicators Project.

Initially, significant frustration threatened the process. Issues of contention were: our advisory versus initiating role, confusion in distinguishing between discussion topics, vital signs indicators, and agency performance indicators, and a perceived need to refine the project objectives to more accurately match the provisions and definitions of the NSA act. Although our Charter begins by referencing our responsibility to assist the Commission in assessing the success of the Management Plan regarding resource protection or enhancement, all subsequent discussion and interaction with the TAT reverted back to the Act itself.

Together with the TAT, several of the goals and objectives of the Vital Signs Indicators Project were revised accordingly, and much of the remaining confusion and frustration we had experienced evolved into a better understanding of the terminology and the issues.

These early concerns were soon replaced by a new source of frustration: the development of a daunting and unmanageable number of indicators, while some additional concerns of our team never seemed to be adequately addressed.

The primary product of our combined efforts has been the completion of a consolidated and concise set of indicators, spanning all the SNECRs. Our team members not only exhaustively debated all the indicators proposed by the technical team and the sub-groups, but also referred back to them additional concerns the public would be expected to have:

1. Litter and graffiti;
2. Excessive and/or unnecessary night lighting;
3. Watershed and aquifer quality and condition;
4. Air quality;
5. The importance of commercial vacancy rates; and
6. The importance of gauging the growth of development and economic activity outside urban areas.

Additional discussion topics were never resolved into vital signs indicators, but hopefully will be developed into enforcement and consistency agency performance measures in Phase Two:

1. The value of tracking economic grants by urban area;
2. The need to establish an inventory of developed property with conventional septic systems versus tertiary on-site waste treatment;
3. The extent to which building permit conditions for resource protection outside urban areas have met compliance requirements; and
4. The need to document recreational impacts on species habitats.

Of particular concern to the CAT was Objective 3.3 under Economic Goals. At the time the NSA act was drafted, many enclaves of rural residential development, or "rural centers" subsequently defined by the Management Plan, did not achieve the exempt status or recognition of urban areas. Furthermore, this designation appears to have been somewhat arbitrary. Tracking how the Commission has allowed development within these communities and recognizing the economic needs of these communities was a primary focus of several members of our group. The extent to which that development has been consistent with resource protection was also discussed, but not resolved. Other CAT members felt that concentrating development in the designated urban areas was more consistent with the purposes of the Act. Communities in the NSA not recognized as urban areas include Corbett, Bridal Veil, Dodson/Warrendale,

Rowena, Skamania, Underwood, Murdock, and eastern portions of Troutdale and Washougal.

All proposed indicators were scrutinized and subsequently prioritized by the CAT to assure that they were clearly understood and would be considered important by the public. This was to avert potential criticism and assure that no esoteric, or "feel good" indicators survived the prioritization process.

A total of 57 proposed indicators remain. We have been sensitive and sympathetic to staff capabilities, budget restraints, and the expenses associated with original data collection.

Key among our concerns going forward is the need to consider cumulative impacts. This is required of the Commission by the NSA Act. For many of the final set of indicators, data exists back to 1986 or further for baseline information. In some cases, we need to establish baseline data now.

Projecting cumulative impacts is essential to establishing acceptable thresholds for the environment before these thresholds are actually exceeded. The results of these projections would then allow the development of a maximum theoretical build-out scenario, made possible in part by using the trend values of the indicators. Prior to exceeding a responsibly defined carrying capacity, costly, undesirable, and possibly irreversible consequences can be avoided. It would be irresponsible not to define both the ecological and human carrying capacity in the Columbia Gorge as the most important outcome of the Vital Signs Indicators Project.

Are the remaining stocks of natural, scenic, cultural, and recreation resources sufficient to sustain the anticipated pressure and effects of human activity in the future? To what extent can each of the scenic, natural, economic, cultural, and recreation resources be degraded or encroached from its present condition and still be deemed functioning, healthy, and viable? Natural resource habitat fragmentation and highly contrasting visible development from public vantage points are two primary examples of the need for establishing cumulative impacts and carrying capacity.

In summary, the experience of Community Advisory Team leads to a number of recommendations for the Gorge Commission:

1. Develop a robust set of agency performance indicators in Phase Two, concentrating on enforcement and consistency. These indicators should be developed from consultants independent of the agency, not staff.
2. As part of Phase Two, include an analysis of discussion topics 1 – 4 listed on page three of this report.

3. The CAT strongly urges the Commission to view the indicators developed to date as a comprehensive set which should remain intact wherever possible to maximize the value of our involvement.
4. Re-convene the CAT for additional feedback prior to the conclusion of Phase Two and Phase Three.
5. Improve understanding, compliance, and communication with the public regarding their perception of the Commission's policy for allowing development outside recognized urban areas. The results of the Vital Signs Indicators should help document the extent of confusion that now exists.
6. Amend the Indicator Project goals to include the development of a Maximum Build-Out scenario, from which associated SNECR thresholds are defined. Then open the process for community feedback to explore public preferences and trade-off awareness.

Phase One of the Indicators Project has now been completed. I would like to personally thank all persevering CAT members, dedicated Commission consultant Jeff Tryens, tireless planner Angie Kenney, Executive Director Jill Arens, as well as other Commission staff and technical experts who provided critical support and encouragement. Collectively, you have made possible the opportunity to serve and provide a lasting impact on protecting and enhancing the National Scenic Area. It has been a fulfilling and valued experience for all of us.

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