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A New Vision for Timber City USA

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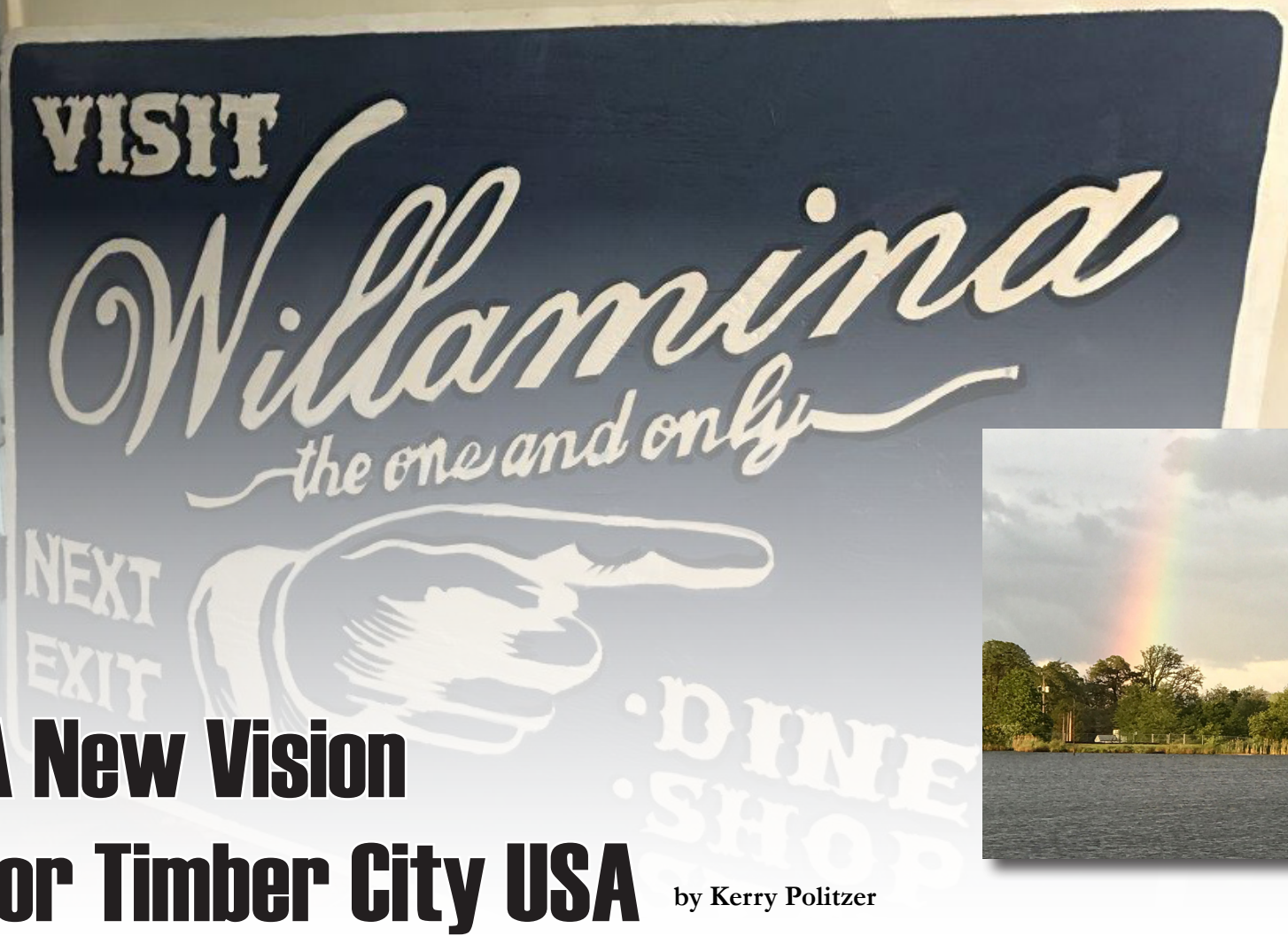
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A New Vision for Timber City USA

by Kerry Politzer

Visit Willimena sign. Photo by Ric Stephens.

Rainbow over Hampton Pond in Willamina. Photo by Bob Sivick.

Since 2012, Kerry Politzer has written about food and culture for Oregon Jewish Life. Her work has also been featured in WHERE Traveler, IN New York, Dessert Professional, and Oregon Music News, among other publications. Kerry is also a professional jazz pianist and an adjunct jazz piano instructor at PSU.

Just past the wineries of Yamhill Valley lies the sleepy city of Willamina, population 2,045.¹ Not much has changed here during the past 20 to 25 years, according to city manager Robert Sivick. The tourist boom experienced by destinations like Dundee has passed by Willamina. Vacant buildings dot the downtown, and the only bank closed a few years ago. Almost 23 percent of residents live in poverty.² Explains Angela Carnahan, the Willamette Valley Regional Representative for the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development, “It’s a distressed community; they have very low-income families. I want to say 50 percent of their residential housing is rented. That is very high for any city; usually, the community that’s doing well has a high percentage of home ownership.”

Previous efforts to encourage economic development in Willamina bore no fruit. Says Sivick, “The last one was in 2004. A Portland architectural firm

1 “City of Willamina Facts.” Official Website of the City of Willamina. Web. 18 February 2017.

2 “Willamina City, Oregon.” United States Census Bureau. Web. 23 February 2017.

did a study about downtown development in Willamina. It was a fantastic study with a fantastic economic development plan, but nothing was ever followed through on.”

But Sivick’s installation as city manager has brought new hope to Willamina. With Carnahan’s assistance, Sivick successfully applied for the Environmental Protection Agency’s Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities grant. Willamina was one of only 25 communities around the United States to be selected for this grant in 2016.

Sivick arrived in Oregon with an outsider’s perspective. “I had come here from Nebraska,” he explains, “so I was familiar with rural communities. I lived in a community about the size of Willamina named St. Paul, and I noted the difference between the commercial activity that was in St. Paul as opposed to Willamina. In St. Paul, they had a bank; in fact, they had three banks. They had retail, they had restaurants, they had a clothing store, all sorts of commercial activity that Willamina did not have.”

Willamina: Potential Tourist Destination

Tourism might end up being the very thing that pulls Willamina out of its economic slump. Remarks Sivick, “In the Willamette Valley, several communities have been moving forward in transitioning from the economies that existed in this area, namely timber and farming, to a more tourism-based economy.”

While Willamina may not be a wine destination, the fertile farmland surrounding the city has the potential to ignite a local culinary movement. Vinson describes the activities of a group of young organic farmers, as well as plans for a meadery and distillery. “There are a lot of wonderful things going on in the surrounding area around Willamina, a lot of very ambitious people doing things the old-fashioned way. There’s a group of farmers on Willamina Creek Road that would like to get a farm tour together. At Belle Mare farm, there’s a woman who grows ancient grains. There’s a lot of farmland here that’s been handed down through generations and not stripped of its nutrients like in commercial farming areas.” Vinson anticipates more Main Street awareness of these efforts, especially in the form of downtown eateries that serve fresh local produce.

“...It’s a distressed community; they have very low-income families...”

Willamina: A Brief History

The City of Willamina was founded in 1879 and incorporated in 1903. It spans 616 acres of land and water in Yamhill and Polk counties. The city experienced its heyday in the late 1930s, when the Pacific Plywood Corporation opened a plant there. But Willamina’s economy, almost wholly dependent upon the production and manufacture of timber, was not equipped for the industry’s precipitous decline.

The production and manufacture of lumber and wood were once Oregon’s main industry. But in 1980, 13,000 lumber and wood workers around the state were laid off. Mills were closing all over the Pacific Northwest, and Willamina was especially hard hit. The closing of Champion Building Products alone put one-quarter of the city’s population out of work.

Katie Vinson, co-owner of Willamina’s Wildwood Hotel, talks about the despair experienced by the community during that time. “There was a huge downturn. It felt like two steps forward, two steps back for a while because we did not have the economic base. When families go into survival mode, they don’t care as much about making the town look cute and presentable for tourists.”



Main Street looking towards downtown Willamina.
Photo by Bob Sivick.

"... a lot of very ambitious people doing things the old-fashioned way."

Rising real estate prices in the Portland metro area might be another factor in the revitalization of Willamina. Remarks Sivick, "We do have a number of homes that are being constructed. We are taking advantage of the sky-high real estate prices in Portland, and even in McMinnville. This is just anecdotal evidence, but because we have a city-owned water utility, people have to come to City Hall to establish water service. And a lot of our new residents have told me that they bought or are building a house in Willamina because they simply can't afford to do that in Portland, or even McMinnville, which is only 15 to 17 miles away." Vinson echoes this assertion: "With the housing prices elsewhere, people that hadn't considered our area in the past have taken a look at it. Most of them are pleasantly surprised; they like the small-town feeling and camaraderie."

Some newer residents are seeking more land and space than can be found in urban areas. Kim Hamblin, an artist and farmer who lives close to Willamina, is enthusiastic about rural living. She talks about why she moved to the area from Portland: "I was looking for a farm within an hour or so of Portland in my price range. I looked north of Portland in the

Clatskanie area and it didn't really vibe with me, and then I looked around in this area and fell in love."

Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities

From the moment Sivick arrived in Willamina, he has been consumed with finding ways to revitalize and communicate excitement about the city. Soon after he took office, Angela Carnahan presented him with information about the EPA's Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities grant program. "I said (to Sivick), here's a great opportunity, you should apply for it. It's free technical assistance to help the community really look at how to become sustainable." Sivick jumped at the chance to apply.

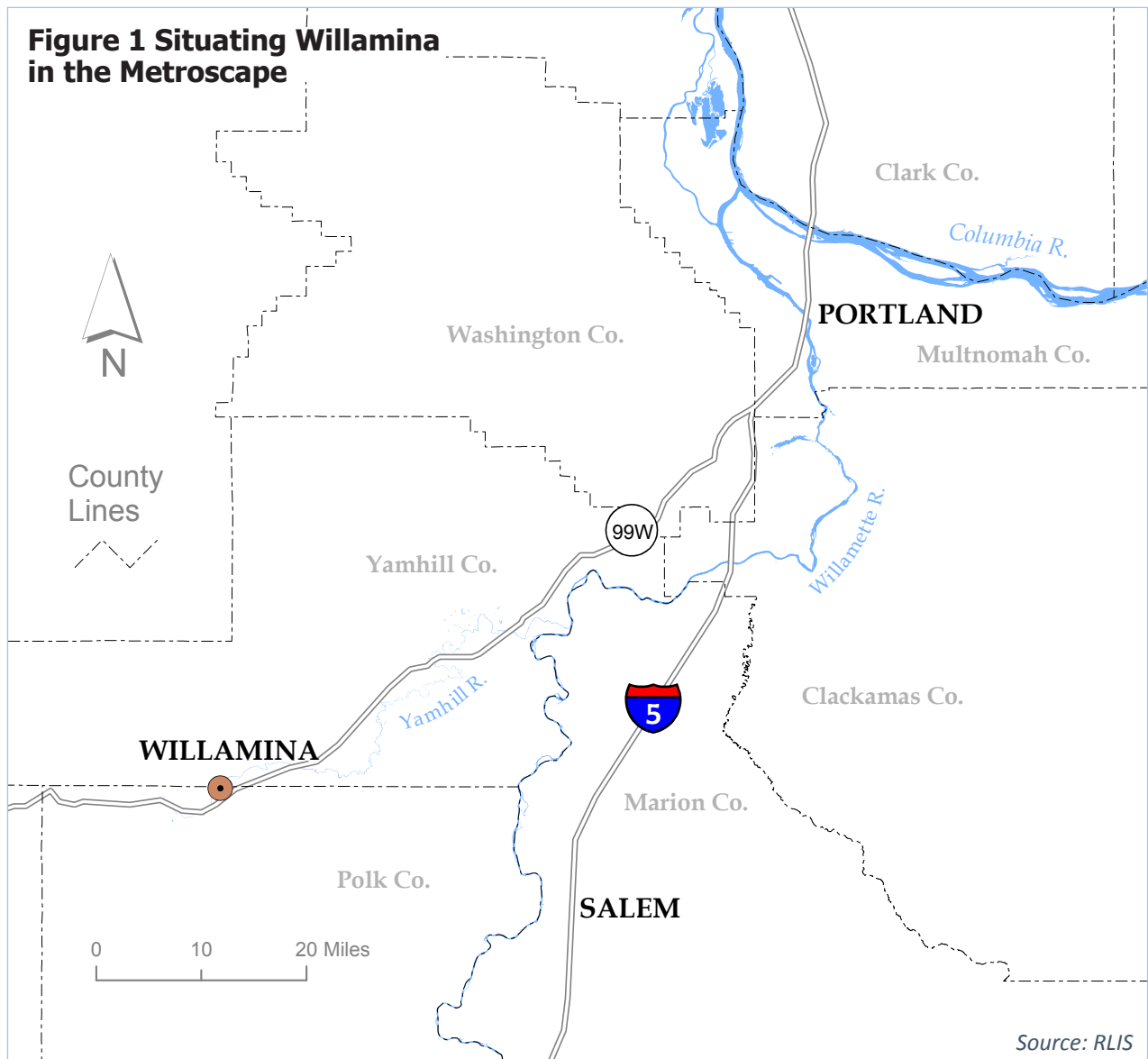
The EPA initiative, which falls under the agency's Smart Growth umbrella, was developed in 2011 to help communities that need assistance with economically and environmentally sustainable development.³ The EPA defines smart growth strategies as ones that "help communities grow in ways that expand economic opportunity while protecting human health and the environment."⁴

³ "Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities." United States Environmental Protection Agency. Web. 23 February 2017.

⁴ "Smart Growth." United States Environmental Protection Agency. Web. 10 March 2017.



One of many vacant and dilapidated houses in Willamina. Photo by Ric Stephens.



Through this program, the EPA aims to “stimulate a discussion about growth and development and strengthen local capacity to implement sustainable approaches.”⁵

The program includes five strategies for helping selected communities: creating equitable development, planning for infill development, implementing sustainable strategies for small cities and rural areas, improving flood resilience for riverine and coastal communities, and establishing green and complete streets.⁶ The Building Blocks grant comes in the form of technical, as opposed to

monetary, assistance. Recipient communities host consultants contracted by the EPA who engage community stakeholders with one- to two-day workshops. After the conclusion of their visit, the consultants issue a detailed report with recommendations for revitalizing the community.

Willamina applied for the Planning for Infill Development, one of the five tools available through the grant. Carnahan says, “I advised them that this was probably the area that would fit with what the city was interested in doing, primarily resuscitating their downtown

⁵ “Smart Growth.” United States Environmental Protection Agency. Web. 10 March 2017.

⁶ “Building Blocks for Sustainable Communities.” United States Environmental Protection Agency. Web. 23 February 2017.

development. They have quite a few blocks of nice buildings, but not a lot of businesses in them. So, how do we get companies and small businesses to invest in the city?"

The Municipal Research and Services Center defines infill development as "the process of developing vacant or under-used parcels within existing urban areas that are already largely developed."⁷ This type of development promotes environmentally and economically sustainable communities. A revitalized, built-up downtown encourages residents to patronize local businesses instead of driving many miles away. Greater density keeps sprawl to a minimum, letting people walk or bike to shops and services.

An EPA report found that infill development, as opposed to greenfield develop-



Mount Hood from the Willamina High School campus. Photo by Bob Sivick.

ment, is especially beneficial for distressed communities. According to the report, some of the advantages of infill development are that

- it costs less than greenfield development;
- mixed-use infill development has the potential to yield more property tax revenue;
- it encourages a diversity of income levels in previously impoverished communities; and
- it fulfills consumer preferences that change as a result of demographic shifts.⁸

In 2015, Marysville, Washington, was one of four cities to receive the infill development grant. The community has already experienced significant positive momentum, including investment in the historic downtown, new sewer and water infrastructure, and landscape improvement.⁹

Obstacles to Improvement

The EPA report outlined several obstacles to infill development, one of which is public perception: "If infill locations have been neglected or abandoned for a long time, it could be difficult to imagine new growth or activity in these areas or to envision why these areas would be attractive. These perception issues can affect the local government's ability to secure financing and could further dampen interest from developers and retailers."¹⁰

It can be difficult for communities to overcome these negative perceptions. Terre Haute, Indiana, another past recipient of the infill development grant, has experienced challenges in this area. In a memorandum composed after the workshop process, officials wrote: "The longstanding economic

"We are taking advantage of the sky-high real estate prices in Portland..."

⁷ "Infill Development: Completing the Community Fabric." Municipal Research and Services Center. Web. 24 February 2017.

⁸ "Attracting Infill Development in Distressed Communities: 30 Strategies." United States Environmental Protection Agency, May 2015. Web. 24 February 2017.

⁹ "Working together to improve infrastructure, economic development." *North County Outlook*, Vol. 10, No. 21. Web. 17 March 2017.

¹⁰ "Attracting Infill Development in Distressed Communities: 30 Strategies." United States Environmental Protection Agency, May 2015. Web. 24 February 2017.

"So, how do we get companies and small businesses to invest in the city?"

challenges in Terre Haute have created an attitude among many people that ambitious economic development goals just 'can't happen here.' The target infill area is the heart of the most distressed neighborhoods in the city, where negative outside perceptions are the strongest and most likely to hold back potential private investment."¹¹

Sivick maintains that one of Willamina's biggest challenges is inertia. "We can't sit around and wait for Superman to come and suddenly rescue the city. We have to do it ourselves."

Winning the EPA grant is only the first step in a long process. According to Sivick, after the EPA finalizes its grant report, an official authority needs to be created in order to formulate and implement Willamina's economic development plan. Carnahan cautions that rehabilitation of the downtown could take years.

Willamina: A Future McMinnville?

Sivick has big dreams for Willamina. "The type of city I would like to see Willamina become is a small-scale McMinnville. I know McMinnville is more than ten times the size of Willamina, but I am really impressed with its mix of commerce, fine dining and lodging, tourism, and the arts. You may be surprised to know that, for a city of this size, Willamina has a large arts community and a vibrant live music scene."

If public participation in the EPA workshop is any indication, excitement is starting to build about the possibilities for Willamina. Carnahan says that the workshop had "really good participation and attendance." Similarly, Sivick recounts his experience at a recent town hall meeting: "I had a meeting for the community as a whole to discuss economic development. It was snowing like there was no tomorrow. . . . But there wasn't an empty seat in that room."

While, as of this writing, the EPA has not released its final report on Willamina, there

11 Infill Development for Distressed Cities, Terre Haute, Indiana: Next Steps Memorandum." Indiana State University. Web. 3 April 2017.

12 <https://willaminavisioning.wordpress.com/>



Governor Kate Brown visiting Willamina's delegation during Rural Oregon Day in Salem. Photo by Bob Sivick.

are already signs of life downtown. Hotelier Vinson is particularly excited about the Willamina Art & Craft Collective, which opened its doors in November 2016. "It gives people an opportunity to see things that are created in our area," she adds. "There's lots of fine art, crafts, soaps, a huge variety of wood products, different gifts and things. That's been neat to see the reaction of people seeing some things that are locally made."

Sivick is hopeful that modeling a can-do attitude will bring new energy to Willamina. He aims to counteract what he terms "a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure" with a whirlwind of energy and ideas. People outside the city are beginning to take note. Ric Stephens, an instructor at Portland State University's College of Urban and Public Affairs, is leading an initiative called Willamina Visioning in connection with the Oregon chapter of the American Planning Association.¹² Graduate students in PSU's Sustainable Cities and Regions class recent-

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ly paid a visit to Willamina to interview residents and city officials.

Stephens, who is optimistic about Willamina's potential for transformation, maintains that student reaction to the city was positive: "Students came away with the feeling that the community was well-positioned to reinvent itself from a timber town to a dynamic city with a new economic, social and environmental framework. It was clearly evident to the class that the community was energetic, resourceful and highly motivated."

Sivick remains philosophical about the pace of development. He explains, "Even if none of the ideas work, the important thing is to bring about a cultural shift from pessimism and failure to one of optimism and success. That cultural shift in itself is good for the economy, as it creates the impression that Willamina is a forward-thinking and proactive community. This perception

becomes reality as it attracts entrepreneurs and young, intelligent, energetic people."

Sivick takes inspiration from the New Deal: "I look to Roosevelt, as both my parents were born in 1934 and he, his programs, and optimism saved my family and many others from ruin." Still, Sivick remains realistic about the timetable for the city's revitalization. "Even under ideal circumstances, solving Willamina's economic, fiscal, and infrastructure problems will require at least a 20-year effort. Ultimately, it is up to the leaders and people of Willamina to decide if they will make that journey."

Note: At the time of publication, city manager Bob Sivick had just announced his resignation. He has accepted an offer to serve as the county administrator in Waushara County, a rural community in central Wisconsin.



Ritsumeikan University and Willamina City Visit PSU. Photo by Ric Stephens.