



Heritage tourism focus of workshop
by SEPP JANNOTTA - Ravalli Republic

March 16, 2009

Ask one Bitterroot local where to go hiking or ski touring and he might tell you about the magic of the Crystal Theater area on Lolo Pass. (And he might also slip in that he got down on bended knee and proposed to his wife in the area.) How would you write the guidebook for your Bitterroot Valley? How would the folks down the street or in the next town write the guidebook for their Bitterroot Valley?

The answer to both those questions could help Bitter Root Cultural Heritage Trust formulate a plan for the BitterRoot Parkway project - a branding project for heritage travel in the Bitterroot Valley complete with guidebook style literature and roadside signage.

Those and similar questions drove the discussion at last week's National Endowment of the Arts-sponsored "Your Town" workshop put on by the Bitter Root Heritage Cultural Trust (BRHCT).

With an eye to tapping the economic possibilities of heritage tourism and travelers' desire to "be in an authentic place," BRHCT President Kristine Kumar said the first step is to catalogue what residents value about life in the Bitterroot Valley and how they would share it with visitors.

"We see this as a very beginning place and many ideas are flowing around this room about where we take this from here," Kumar said, adding that the vision is more of a 20-year mission than an immediate throw-up-signs-tomorrow plan.

As a showpiece on how to start gathering and making sense of these disparate views of what makes the valley special there was a 15-foot wide, floor-to-ceiling satellite map of the Bitterroot. The museum trustees, history buffs, artists, commissioners and laypeople attending the gathering were asked to jot a note about their favorite slices of the Bitterroot and mark corresponding points on the map.

According to Chris Overdorf, a partner in the Seattle-based landscape architecture firm that helped facilitate the "Your Town" process, those little notes and locations were then logged into a computer and will eventually form the basis of a Web site that will allow everyone to see the quilt work of sentiments that make up a Bitterroot regional pride.

It is a pride likely to supercede the divisive issues such as how far should one build from a stream or whether to build a Wal-Mart, Overdorf said.

"I really hope this is the start of a new dialogue that gets neighbor talking to neighbor about the landscape that surrounds them and about their neighborhoods," Overdorf said. "It can help undo misconceptions about what your neighbor's values are."

The three-day conference was centered on finding ways to further promote the various cultural heritage hotspots that already exist in the valley, said BRHCT Vice President Dave Schultz. It was also designed to tease out cultural assets that are here but hadn't yet been highlighted, Schultz added.

A casual glance at any Bitterroot Valley map will likely locate St. Mary's Mission or the Daly Mansion, but Schultz wondered if perhaps people might also be interested in visiting ongoing local enterprises like Mike Ellison's sheep ranch or Huls Farm dairy.

In a process that called together people from each of the towns in the valley to plan how to appeal to tourists, Schultz said it was just as important that the people of the Bitterroot understand and

appreciate their home landscape and culture for their own sakes.

From there the ideas will come for how to connect the valley's many stories.

One down-range plan that the BRCHT wants to promote is a heritage trail in Hamilton connecting Leonardi Farmstead and the Daly Mansion by way of a potential airport museum. Projects such as this could likely be funded through grants, Schultz said.

Schultz and Overdorf said they believed that every corner of the valley had the potential for similar projects.

Overdorf stressed that this kind of grassroots planning is the best way to help formulate a message that travelers might take away from a day spent driving around the BitterRoot Parkway.

"I mean how cool is it that you have a guy who tells you that this is the place where he proposed to his wife. If you get enough people together to share stories of what is important to them about their community you eventually cross that threshold of understanding," Overdorf said. "And what's going to come out of that process is going to be better than anything an agency or planner or land-use expert can come up with."

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