



Workshop to explore heritage tourism
by PERRY BACKUS - Ravalli Republic

March 4, 2009

The Bitterroot Valley could be a treasure trove for people looking to hop on the heritage tourism trail.

All visitors need is a good map.

Next week, people from all parts of the valley will converge in Hamilton to start talking about the potential of developing the groundwork needed to help visitors uncover the culture and natural beauty of the Bitterroot while protecting the lifestyle its residents have come to enjoy.

The focus of the two and a half day workshop will be on the corridor loop created by U.S. 93 and the Eastside Highway that organizers are calling Montana's BitterRoot Parkway.

Hosted by Bitterroot Cultural Heritage Trust, the workshop is funded through a National Endowment of the Arts grant.

The National Endowment has been funding similar workshops in rural towns across the country since 1990. The first workshop was held in Bozeman in 1991. That was the last time until now that one has been hosted by a Montana community.

The "Your Town: The Citizens' Institute on Rural Design" program is designed to address a wide range of problems that rural communities face that can affect the vitality of a community or its sense of place.

"We expect the workshop to be jam packed," said Kristine Komar, Bitterroot Cultural Heritage Trust board president. "We've been so grateful that people have sensed that this is something that will be meaningful to them.

The event begins Thursday, March 12 at 2 p.m. with an afternoon session that features a walking tour of some Hamilton historic neighborhoods, a pancake dinner at St. Paul's Church and an evening keynote address by Grant Jones, a well-known Seattle landscape architect, poet and conservation planner.

Jones' firm has designed scenic highways, river greenways and cultural centers around the country, including the new Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

"Our emphasis is on culture and nature," Jones said Tuesday in a telephone interview. "We don't do stereotypical commercial architecture. We work from the ground level up with property owners who want to conserve their lands."

Jones' keynote address is titled "Making a Marriage with the Land."

He'll offer examples of where communities have come together around different projects his firm has been involved with, including the recent upgrade of U.S. 93 between Evaro and Polson.

The keynote address is open to the public. It will begin at 7 p.m. at the Bedford Building.

On Friday and Saturday, the workshop's participants will roll up their sleeves and go to work discussing a variety of topics that range from identifying intrinsic resources to considering the potential of economic development.

The public will have a second opportunity to listen in on Saturday afternoon at 2:30 p.m. at the Bitterroot River Inn when the different groups will present their conclusions at the end of the workshop.

Chere Jiusto, executive director of the Montana Preservation Alliance, said communities across Montana are coming together to consider the potential of heritage tourism.

"We've been working very successfully with a number of different communities to develop guides that outline the kinds of experiences that can draw people into a place and encourage them to stay longer," Jiusto said.

Jiusto wrote the guidebook to Hamilton's historical neighborhoods several years ago.

"The Montana Preservation Alliance has been working the Bitterroot Valley for many years," she said. "We're concerned about a variety of historical sites and we want to help keep those pieces intact."

The Alliance is one of the partners helping bring the workshop to Hamilton.

"We hope it will empower people in the valley to begin looking at different options in planning for the future," Jiusto said.

More information about the Bitter Root Cultural Heritage Trust can be found at www.brcht.org. Komar can be contacted at 375-9953.

"It's such an exciting experience to see people coming together and pitching in to make this a success," Komar said. "Maybe it's just the right time. People seem to understand that we can work together to make a difference and at the same time, take care of the things we value so they won't be lost."

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