

# The Treasure Valley Partnership

It was June 16, 1997 when the members of seven city councils and two county commissions met for a three-day summit to seek common ground on several key issues, especially the rapid growth in the area. The Treasure Valley, in southwestern Idaho, is a high desert plateau with access to world class recreational opportunities. With beautiful open spaces and plenty of ski country, the Valley is a natural magnet for people who want to enjoy nature's beauty. About four hundred thousand people live in this 30-mile corridor, roughly one third of Idaho's entire population. At the beginning of the 1990s, residents could enjoy large expanses of open, undeveloped land between each city in the two-county region.

By the mid 90s, however, the Valley had become one of the fastest growing regions in the country. The open space between the cities was quickly disappearing and the local folks were concerned about the growing sprawl. A few numbers capture the nature of growth:

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	<b>1990 population</b>	<b>2000 population</b>
City of Meridian:	9,000	34,000
City of Eagle:	1,900	9,000
Treasure Valley:	300,000	420,000

It wasn't clear how to deal with the growth. The Valley's residents welcomed the economic boom but they worried about the change in community identity, traffic, loss of open space and farmland. And they didn't want any governmental entity telling them what to do about it. The Valley has a long history of independence and local autonomy. The "heavy hand of government bureaucrats" doesn't play well here. What to do?

The idea of the June meeting came from Christine Saum, Executive Director of the Mayors' Institute on Cities and Dena Belzer, an economist from Berkeley, California who works with communities on growth and development issues. They had gotten to know Boise Mayor Brent Coles at an earlier Mayors' Institute and suggested a regional forum for Valley leaders to discuss their concerns. Coles was open to the idea. The initial question was, how to get other regional leaders interested? Boise (population 180,000) is the largest city in the Valley and state, and as the "800 pound gorilla" it couldn't be seen as trying to force regional solutions on its neighbors.

Coles set aside money from his budget to develop a forum on regionalism and directed his staff to work with Saum and Belzer. They interviewed a number of elected officials and community leaders during early spring of '97 to learn what they thought the critical issues were. It turned out that all the mayors and commissioners had the same concerns on their minds, and finding a way to cope with the rapid growth was at the top of the list. Given that, Coles suggested a conference to discuss the issues in more depth, and others agreed. Saum and Belzer helped by inviting several national experts on economics, city planning, open space, growth and transportation issues to speak at the conference. The primary players were the elected officials of nine local jurisdictions: the cities of Boise, Caldwell, Eagle, Kuna, Garden City, Meridian, Nampa, Parma and Ada and Canyon Counties.

"That first forum went very well, for several reasons," recalled Elizabeth Conner, current Executive Director of the Treasure Valley Partnership. "There were several reasons for that. First, the population was exploding. and it was pushing city and county budgets, expertise and planning ability past capacity. Second, these mayors and commission chairmen were committed to setting aside their differences and work for the greater good. Because this is a pretty homogeneous area, these folks had a lot in common in addition to their shared concern about

growth and they found that out at the forum. And then, there's Mayor Coles. He was the champion for this effort. He went to each county commission and city council and asked them all to attend ... and he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer!

"You have to understand Brent Coles. He's quiet, fairly soft spoken, yet he's incredibly focused and driven. He pushes himself to the maximum every day and expects the same from his staff. Yet he manages power very well. He's forceful without being bombastic. Besides all of that, he happens to be generous to others; he treats people very well. And maybe most important, he doesn't let his ego go to his head." Coles also has an interest in the use of technology to educate people. He had a video made after the June conference that depicts the Valley and its challenges. "That proved to be an excellent marketing tool to explain what we're trying to do, and why, to the Valley residents."

By the end of the forum, the participants agreed to form the Treasure Valley Partnership, and each signed the Treasure Valley Partnership Agreement. Its overall mission is to foster regional cooperation and collaboration. More specifically, its goals are:

### **Treasure Valley Partnership Goals**

- 1. Create coherent regional growth and development patterns** (such as coordinated investment in waste water treatment plans, cooperation on managing storm water runoff and finding ways to conserve ground water reserves)
- 2. Link land use and transportation** (increasing transit use, creation of bike and pedestrian trails, and of greenbelt areas)
- 3. Reinforce community identities and their sense of place** (involves development of a vision for the region's future that honors each locality's unique characteristics), and
- 4. Protect and enhance open space and recreational opportunities** (in part by encouraging acquisition and preservation of interconnected open space).

A fifth goal, to educate and build support for the partnership within the Valley, was added in 2000.

The parties agreed that their mayors and commission chairs would represent the localities in the partnership, and that they would meet monthly. It started fairly informally, with staff being provided by Mayor Coles' office. "We limited the partnership to one elected official from each governing board," Conner explains. "Some people have suggested we widen it, and we've discussed that each year, but the key issues on people's minds are the things that these localities have to work out. There's really two big issues: land use, and police powers. Only the municipal elected officials can deal with those.

"Before the Partnership, police in one city or county couldn't arrest suspects across jurisdictional lines. They had to go through a complicated process to follow, arrest and prosecute criminals. And ambulances couldn't assist people in cases where they were over the county lines, even if the "appropriate" ambulance was much further from an accident! We got an early win during the first year when the Partnership members began to sign memos of understandings (MOUs) allowing their respective ambulances and police officers to cross jurisdictional lines."

By the end of 1998, the members agreed that the Partnership was going to be around for awhile and they needed to be more organized. The members voted to establish the Partnership as its own entity and hire staff – thereby removing the dependence on the staff at Boise City. They formed a nonprofit 501 (c) (3) corporation and spent a great deal of time in '98 and early '99 having monthly educational meetings where all the members became familiar with issues of regional impact such as sewer and water issues, planning issues, etc.

Conner says the Partnership's members like to see themselves as a "think tank," a group that can reflect on emerging and long-term issues without the glare of the media and hundreds of people inspecting their every move. The Partnership can't impose a solution on any elected body; its only influence is persuasion. Interestingly, the members urge the public and media to attend some of their meetings, but don't announce others. "It's not that we would tell someone to leave if they came," says Conner, "but one reason the Partnership works so well is that it often meets without an audience. The members can be really open in these settings, ask 'stupid questions' and think out loud. This quiet setting lets them haggle out their differences; they appreciate not

being caught in a media ‘gotcha’ game.” Conner adds that anytime two council or commission members from the same local government attend a meeting, it constitutes an open meeting under state law and is publicly announced.

## **Some Results:**

The partners do much more than talk. In their first four years they have created an environment fostering real collaboration on tough issues. For instance:

They worked out a decision on the location of a sub-campus to Boise State University, located in downtown Boise. Boise State had grown rapidly in the past decade, and a new campus was needed to accommodate the growing number students from the Treasure Valley who wanted to attend. The Partnership was instrumental in the decision to locate the new campus in Canyon County, which was the best location for the whole region, as opposed to putting it in the City of Boise. The siting of a college is an important economic decision; most localities will fight fiercely for the privilege. In the Treasure Valley, many cities came together to decide the best location that was easily accessed by all and was near potential future rail transit.

The Boise City Attorney’s office has been working to develop a cooperative agreement with the City of Meridian on prosecution of legal matters. When Meridian’s prosecutors are overwhelmed, Boise lends some of its attorneys.

The cities of Eagle and Boise signed an MOU enabling Eagle to send some of its waste water through Boise’s sewage treatment facility. Before 1997, Eagle had a moratorium on building houses; it lacked sewage capacity for new developments. The change is saving taxpayer dollars (there’s no need now to build a new treatment plant in Eagle)

The first regional park was built. And the Greenbelt Pathway that runs through Boise, has now been planned as a regional pathway and eventually will run all the way to Caldwell. As noted above, local police can now cross jurisdictional lines when pursuing suspects, and issue citations in other localities.

Solid relationships among the members. This, of course, isn’t a “result” that’s tangible or visible to others, but it has greatly helped the partners deal openly and candidly with tough

issues that might otherwise divide them; they can now look at those issues from a Valley-wide perspective.

The Partnership isn't without problems and controversies. One issue was mentioned above – should it grow in membership? Many regional partnerships include chambers of commerce, educational institutions, neighborhood and special interest groups, but Treasure Valley's partners are convinced they're getting much more done to meet their goal of collaborating on regional issues by limiting the group to elected leaders in each jurisdiction. "Certain government agencies want to join, and we've told them No. That's caused some hard feelings," Conner acknowledges. She points out that there are many groups with a wide membership already in Treasure Valley. For instance, the local Metropolitan Planning Organization serves both Ada and Canyon Counties. The partnership doesn't cast a broad net in terms of its individual members, but it is democratic through its inclusion of each locality's elected representatives.

Another criticism: the small size of the group, and the fact that many of its members have been friends for years, leaves it open to charges of being an "old boys' network." Conner points out the advantages of its approach:

"We see it as a real strength to have a small group of elected leaders come together and discuss the pressures they all are facing. Mayors and Commissioners face unique challenges in office that officials of a recreational district or highway district do not. Because of these challenges, they have formed incredibly strong relationships over time, and those relationships help them deal with potentially divisive issues. Plus, they've become really supportive of one another; I'm convinced they informally help each other be more effective on their respective commissions and city councils. Our small number, and the friendships and relationships that have formed, really help these members keep their egos in check. They are truly concerned with not only the health and wellbeing of their individual communities, but of all the communities in the Treasure Valley.

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