COMMUNITIES—UI Extension begins next era of helping small Idaho towns thrive

CONTACT PRISCILLA SALANT at psalant@uidaho.edu; www.extension.uidaho.edu/horizons

IN 2003, UI EXTENSION BEGAN IDAHO'S HORIZONS PROGRAM—a long-term partnership with the Northwest Area Foundation and small towns struggling with poverty and changing demographics. After open dialogue, leadership development, and vision rallies, Horizons communities took action to build economic prosperity and improve quality of life. Since the program started, 49 small towns have completed the rigorous 18-month program. Today, hardworking Horizons communities blanket Idaho, from Bonners Ferry in the northern panhandle to Salmon in the rugged Lemhi River Valley.

Horizons produced tangible results. Communities secured more than $5 million in grants for transportation, housing, and economic development. Many people ran for public office and took leadership roles for the first time. They started farmers markets, food banks, arts groups, and developed new relationships with state and regional organizations.

New chapter begins. After eight years, the NWAF's generous support for Horizons is ending. “The University of Idaho has an unprecedented opportunity to build on the capacity and relationships created through Horizons,” said Priscilla Salant, UI’s coordinator for outreach and engagement. “With UI Extension in the lead, we're building the next generation of Horizons partnerships by aligning our statewide teaching and service missions to benefit Idaho towns.”

Student teams to work in communities. Steve Drown, UI Extension education specialist for bioregional planning and landscape architecture, is piloting the new partnership model. This spring and summer, he will lead a team of graduate students and business volunteers to design public space projects requested by Horizons communities. “Students will gain hands-on experience helping communities achieve their vision,” said Drown. “From this pilot, he continued, “we’ll learn a new way of doing business.”

UI and Idaho Rural Partnership will host Backyard Innovation, the 2011 Idaho Rural Conference, July 28 to 30 in Boise. People from rural communities will see innovation from other small Idaho towns. Learn more at www.uidaho.edu/outreachandengagement/byi.

How do you leverage your town’s skill sets?

CONTACT PHIL WATSON at pwatson@uidaho.edu

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO agricultural economist Phil Watson wants to help communities better leverage their workforces for more flexible economic development.

One way is to go beyond looking at job categories and instead look at worker skills. A machinist in a lumber mill, for example, may help attract a new employer in float plane manufacturing.

Watson is in the first year of a $164,000 U.S. Department of Agriculture rural development grant to devise an economic development analysis tool to help communities take a new look at their workforces’ strengths and then leverage them to attract businesses needing similar skills.

“Each occupation has a mix of knowledge, skills, abilities, and education,” Watson said. “The purpose is to help communities’ recruiting efforts by displaying their workforce advantages to new business prospects.”

Watson, an assistant professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, also serves on the UI’s new Building Sustainable Communities Initiative (BSCI). First, Watson will help communities attract “green” jobs. Characteristics that make a job green, such as being environmentally friendly and sustainable, will also work to attract other job sectors. UI Extension, Michele Vachon of BSCI, and the city of Priest River are partners in this effort.

Shorter, less expensive help for entrepreneurs

CONTACT LORIE HIGGINS at lhiggins@uidaho.edu; www.2dnw.org/

UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO EXTENSION EDUCATORS in 42 of Idaho’s 44 counties for years have held workshops to help small or start-up businesses improve their chances of success. Some excellent comprehensive programs, however, last too long (10 weeks) or cost too much ($300) for some Idaho audiences.

Lorie Higgins, Moscow, UI Extension community development team member, is piloting 11 hours of 4-session workshops this spring in Plummer, Lapwai, and Moscow, using materials available for free or nominal fees online. Many come from the new national eXtension website at www.extensionb.org/entrepreneurship. Through March and April, some 60 entrepreneurs ranging from triathlon trainers to artists and plumbers have attended or will attend the workshops. Topics included business planning, marketing, fiscal management, and next steps.

Higgins is moving ahead, too, updating her 2°NW website listing interesting shops, historical and cultural sites, locally grown foods, wineries, and lodgings of interest to tourists in the region between the 45 and 47 degrees latitude in Idaho (Riggins to Plummer) and southeastern Washington. A map suggesting tour loops will soon be distributed free through chambers of commerce and at locations listed.

DID YOU KNOW?

83%

PERCENTAGE OF IDAHO’S 169 TOWNS THAT HAVE 6,000 RESIDENTS OR FEWER; 53% HAVE 1,000 OR FEWER RESIDENTS. ONLY 17% OF IDAHO TOWNS HAVE MORE THAN 6,000 RESIDENTS.