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PILOT ROCK

Rural towns share successes

Symposium gives community leaders chance to discuss ways to grow

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Pilot Rock held its first Rural Symposium on Tuesday. People from communities around central and Eastern Oregon, and as far west as Maupin, came to discuss success and hurdles to overcome in bringing life to small towns. Greg Hohensee, an enterprise facilitator hired by towns in central Oregon, spoke about grassroots economic development.
Staff photo by Samantha Bates

Of all the success stories being touted Tuesday during the first-ever Pilot Rock Rural Symposium, Boardman Mayor Chet Phillips stole the spotlight with a touching project that pulled his town together in a special way.

As mayor, Phillips was asked to take part in the youth advisory council at Riverside High School. Coming into the group, he knew he had to do something positive and something successful, so he decided to create a "wish list."

"It wasn't received very well," Phillips said. "The public saw a potential embarrassment. They were concerned we would be not including the entire school population - we have a large Hispanic population at our school."

So Phillips made sure the wish list crossed cultural lines. He handed out requests to 243 students, asking them for name a wish they needed or a wish for someone else. The students included his or her name at the bottom of the sheet. Phillips organized the wishes, then cut the names off the bottom.

"Every wish was anonymous," he said.

Then he went into the community, asking for wishes to be fulfilled - without offering any direction - just to see how creative the community could be.

"It worked," he said, "Out of 243, we granted 65 wishes."

The school came together for an assembly and called up each student, asking them to support all wishes.

"A student comes out of the audience, everybody applauds - and understand the cultural issue there, this was a huge thing," Phillips said. "There are people who don't get along on either side, even at the student level. But everybody was supportive. And we had Hispanic students granting wishes to Anglo students. We had Anglo students granting wishes to Hispanic students. We had tears - some of them mine - from teachers and students and the audience and business people or community activists and people involved."

Phillips' touching story came as he stood in front of a room full of 50 community leaders from around the state. His was the first story related in a day featuring discussions about overcoming obstacles and trying to make small communities in rural Oregon better.

The keynote speaker was Bruce Sorte, a self-defined "Garrison Keillor" economist from Oregon State

University Extension. He said successful communities do two things: retain their population and keep their young people. To do that, they need to foster creativity and keep moving toward the future, he said. He urged those in attendance to see community projects as stories - to try to make a mental picture of what they want to happen and look for the characters who make it possible as well as those who stand in the way.

Those characters who stand in the way became a sticking point for discussion among the participants.

They wanted to know how to deal with the "naysayers," such as those who in the beginning said Phillips'

wish list was a bad idea.

Sorte advised empathy.

"The empathy is the toughest thing," he said. "If the success is going to persist, you have to be

empathetic with the folks who don't agree with you. ... I think most naysayers are not familiar with being listened to."

"We engage the naysayers," said Greg Hohensee, an enterprise facilitator working for communities in

central Oregon. "We try to get them to participate in the program and take the time to sit down and figure

out why are they talking about this? Why aren't they happy? And the reality is in most of these rural

communities, it's been a generation since the town has seen success. Everyone fears change."

"The naysayers were here when the town started to disintegrate," said Pilot Rock City Manager Paul Koch. "They didn't step up. They didn't see the vision."

Some people advised starting small and working toward bigger successes. Others advised keeping with something until it takes.

"We're at basic survival level," Koch said, "and every little tiny thing you do that creates opportunity for one job or even a part-time job is a step in the right direction."

