

CITIZEN INITIATIVES

Sitka and Wrangell, Alaska

Sitka

The town of Sitka, located in southeast Alaska on the coast of Baranof Island, was the first capital of Alaska. This deep water port of 8500 residents is set against a backdrop of mountains to the east and Sitka Sound to the west. Many on this island and neighboring islands rely on the bay and the forests for their subsistence. Other residents depended on employment at a local pulp mill. For years, it was the town's largest single employer of 400 people.

Two years ago, the Alaska Pulp plant was closed down. Local officials and residents alike feared the worst, anticipating economic collapse and high unemployment. The city administration took a traditional route in devising an economic recovery plan. It formed a task force and held meetings to decide what the future of the community might be and to develop a set of recommendations, which included attracting another large employer.

In contrast, the reaction of many citizens proved to be quite different. Initially they too were concerned about the loss of the mill on their jobs and Sitka's economic future. As time went on, they became more interested in developing an economy that was more diverse as well as environmentally sound. They wanted more small businesses employing a few employees rather than large single businesses that might have an adverse affect on the environment.

Recent economic trends

Despite the initial gloomy predictions from local officials after the mill closed, the town has continued to prosper — tax revenues are \$85,000 higher than expected, housing starts are up, business revenues and startups have increased, land values are higher, and job creation is strong as evidenced by the public health hospital planned expansion with new jobs for 160 people. Although the timber industry is declining, other economic areas are expanding. Tourism is now a billion dollar per year industry in Alaska and an important part of Sitka's economy. Small businesses, health care and especially construction are growing. Since the plant was closed, air and water quality have improved substantially.

Citizen initiatives

In early 1994 a citizens comprehensive plan was developed to help citizens envision their future and make recommendations to the City Council. It has informally prompted a series of citizen action steps.

This initiative and the process citizens are employing are proving to be an inspiration for other small communities in Southeast Alaska such as Craig, Elfin Cove, Gustavus, Hoonah, Kiawock, Kupreanof, Pelican, Tenakee Springs, Yakutat, and the Haida Tribe/ Hydaburg Cooperative Association.

Many citizens are seeking a diversified economy that produces jobs while protecting the environment. They emphasize the need for:

- sustainable forestry practices and yields;
- support for a value-added sustainable wood products industry that increases the number of jobs per tree cut;
- wood processing facilities that are environmentally-sound;
- local drying and processing facilities for value-added wood to meet their current construction and other needs (at present there are no drying facilities, meaning that unprocessed wood is exported to Canada or to the lower 48 and then imported for use in construction.);

- special protection for areas that are particularly important for natives and other residents depending on a subsistence way of life.

They are looking at examples of businesses that are, according to Kathie Wasserman, the director of a new marketing alliance for value-added products, "forest-related, not timber-dependent." It would correspond to the work of WoodNet, located in Washington state, which supports a collaborative effort among artists, artisans and timber interests. Other examples of value-added enterprises would include a company in Vancouver that produces wooden outdoor furniture and has created 20 jobs using as little as 500,000 board feet per year.

One of the grassroots organizations, *Friends of Southeast's Future*, is taking steps to insure that sustainable logging practices are employed. They have drafted, circulated and presented the town's first citizens' initiative, scheduled for inclusion on the ballot this fall, which will call for a change in timber extraction practices. Specifically, it calls for an end to clearcutting and to all comparable logging methods in the "Sitka Local Use Area" in order to prevent habitat destruction.

Maintaining ecosystems and protecting habitat is especially important for natives and non-natives alike who subsist on game and fish. The livelihood of commercial fishermen is at stake as well. They catch as much as 800,000 pounds of salmon each year and are equally dependent on maintaining a clean environment. Any major impact, such as deforestation, affects their survival.

This wholly grassroots effort has taken this initiative directly to the people of Sitka and has been effective in publicizing it in the local paper, on radio and television spots, and through word of mouth. They are persuaded that this effort is critical to assuring a sustainable future for their community.

Citizens from all walks of life have gathered signatures from their neighbors, in stores, at schools and even from fellow fishermen on the water, in numbers far more numerous than required by law. If the initiative receives a majority of votes, it will have legal authority.

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Gustavus, Hoonah, Kiawock, Kupreanof, Pelican, Tenakee Springs, Yakutat, and the Haida Tribe/Hydaburg Cooperative Association. They are also developing resolutions, with similar emphasis, for adoption in their jurisdictions.

Wrangell 2001

The potential loss of a sawmill, which in fact closed in 1994, also prompted this fishing and timbering town of 2,300 located at the middle of the Panhandle in Southeast Alaska to reexamine its future. Local townspeople came together to address their needs and to develop a plan that was different from their traditional reliance on logging.

Beginning in 1991, a series of strategic planning meetings were held involving a broad cross-section of the townspeople from business, government, fishing, health care facilities, schools, the former mill, and native tribes. This effort was coordinated by Bob Gorman, district agent for the Alaskan Cooperative Extension Service and Keene Kohrt, Wrangell district Ranger for the US Forest Service.

The goal of these meetings was to encourage the expression of the vision and ideas of the stakeholders. They attracted a large number of residents with diverse points of view. After the first year of meetings, in order to gather a wider input of opinions, the organizers solicited views through a community survey on economic, infrastructure, and socio-economic issues.

Some of the issues the respondents considered as priorities were ways to enhance the fishing industry, maintain timber interests, provide education for all, expand the visitors' center, and improve the infrastructure. The discussion ground rules were clearly presented to insure respect and full consideration of all views. The main recommendations include:

- opportunities for small businesses engaged in value-added specialty products;
- a unified approach to dealing with natural resource issues;
- support services for the fishing industry to encourage fishermen and fish processors to stay in Wrangell.

Apart from developing the action plan of economic diversification focusing on timber, fishing, tourism, and a strengthened infrastructure for fisheries, respondents convinced the City Council to hire an economic development planner to help implement the plan. Another benefit for the

How Get in Touch with Citizen Initiatives

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Scope: Town/rural

Inception Date: Sitka -1993;
Wrangell - 1991

Participants: Townspeople, fishermen, loggers, Native Americans

Project type: Citizen-led initiatives, natural resource conservation, local business development

Methods used: Public education, local organizing and planning, collaboration with other jurisdictions

Lessons learned: Public processes need to be inclusive. Anticipatory planning works best. Participatory processes help citizens develop new perspectives.

community was a generation trained in leadership and facilitating skills. They learned the importance of working together, developing consensus, and thinking long-term. Bob Gorman stated the most important aspect of this effort, and that of Sitka, has been the process.

Challenges

The residents of both Sitka and Wrangell have chosen to take an active part in rebuilding their economy in ways that look at the long-term health of their communities. These are new concepts and ones that require the participation of all the stakeholders. Perhaps the greatest challenge for Sitka is finding consensus on its economic future. Wrangell faces a similar situation but rebuilding a solid economic base may

take more time. As a result of both these planning processes the future will reflect the vision of many rather than a few.

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UPDATE

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Sitka

In February 1997, a year after the *Friends of Southeast's Future* first citizens' initiative failed by four votes, a second initiative was defeated by a competing one sponsored by the timber industry. Although the *Friends of Southeast's Future's* initiative was drafted by local residents, Larry Edwards feels that it lost crucial votes because of inferences that it was drafted with the help of outside environmental organizations. The vote did not result in total defeat, however, because the timber industry was forced to shift its initiative toward the center to win. As a result, some restrictions on logging have been imposed, though not of the scope that the *Friends of Southeast's Future* had desired.

Wrangell

The 2001 plan has had an enduring influence on the way in which Wrangell's political and economic systems operate. The process has been adapted for a tourism development plan, a legislative lobbying plan, and an expansion plan for the city's ports and harbor. Wrangell's biggest challenge, however, has been to determine how a sudden 1996 windfall federal appropriation of \$32 million should be spent. Although the money has provided for several infrastructure projects such as port and harbor expansion, water and sewer improvements, and a museum and recreational facility, it has also fragmented the community on many expenditure issues, even those with broad public support in the Wrangell 2001 process.

Overall, Wrangell 2001 is remembered favorably by the people who participated in it and by the people who are affected by it. Several Alaska communities have copied the process with equal or greater success. Bob Gorman feels that the smaller the community, the more successful the effort, for as one city councilman in Wrangell states, "the level of government is only as good as the level of involvement."

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