

***Recent Economic Development Efforts in  
Benewah County, Idaho***

Aaron J. Harp and Neil R. Meyer

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## Introduction

In reviewing the economic development documents concerning St. Maries and Benewah County, one conclusion is obvious: an extraordinary amount of time and energy was expended on development questions over the last ten years. The documents listed in Table 1 are the outcome of these efforts and subject of this review.

**Table 1: Documents Reviewed**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Document</i>
1997	"Notes from the Small City Summit" May 22, 1997
1995	"Benewah County Community Needs Assessment 1995" Prepared by: Beth Kempton
1994(?)	Collaborative Planning: Cases in Economic and Community Diversification; USDA Forest Service, FS-575,
1993	"1993 Plan of Action" St. Maries - Greater St. Joe Development Foundation, Inc., May, 1993.
1993	"Phase I Report on Feasibility Study of the St. Maries Market Area and Conclusions Regarding Proposed Lodging Development" September 1993.
1993	Feasibility Study; Lodging, Restaurant, and Convention Center Community of St. Maries; Proposal to USDA-Forest Service, February 1993.
1992	Idaho Works Gem Community, Certification Manual, Idaho Department of Commerce, 1990-1992.
1992	Bylaws of Greater St. Joe Development Foundation, Inc.
1990	City of St. Maries Downtown Vision Plan, Greater St. Joe Development Corporation City of St. Maries, Idaho, May 1990.
1989(?)	The Greater St. Joe Development Foundation Inc.; Long Term Community Development Strategy
1988	Small City Economic Development, St. Maries, Idaho, Sept. 28, 1988.

Three major conclusions can be reached. Each is outlined below with a short discussion.

### **1. Numerous Concrete Steps are Already Available**

An extensive list of concrete "next steps" that might be taken for economic development already exists in these documents. The Gem Community manual, the needs assessment, notes from the Small City Summit and other documents contain numerous

reports of accomplishments, ideas and actions that are proposed or underway. We need to know which of these were actually tried and what impact did they have on the community. The notes from the Small City Summit include the information in Table 2.

**Table 2: Business Start-ups and Job Creation in Benewah County.**

	<b>Startups</b>	<b>New Jobs</b>
1994	9	na
1995	29	208
1996	17	120
1997	22	129
1998	14	81
<b>Total</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>538</b>

Source: Notes From the Small City Summit, May 1997.

This is an extraordinary accomplishment for a county the size of Benewah County. This table produces some obvious questions. Are these businesses still viable and has the number of jobs changed since the figures were compiled? How many of these businesses and jobs are due to economic development efforts? This level of economic development could well be the outcome of ongoing efforts on the part of local people.

## ***2. Large Scale Lodging Development is Unlikely***

The report from Jinneman, Kennedy, and Associates points to the fact that large scale lodging development is unlikely in most of Benewah County. Location and low traffic conspire to create this situation. There were many ideas in the documentation to establish festivals or events to draw people to the county in general and St. Maries in particular, thereby increasing traffic flow. In addition, many ideas for waterfront development are discussed. Have any of these been undertaken or further developed? For St. Maries and most of the county this remains a classic “chicken and egg” problem

in rural development. Recent efforts by the Coeur d'Alene tribe on the west side of the county counter this situation. Access to Highway 95 is the prime condition for a successful lodging development and the tribe is well placed to take maximum advantage of the situation.

### **3. Continuing Economic Development by Coeur d'Alene Tribe**

Economic development efforts by the tribe continue along the Highway 95 corridor. In many ways, the economic future of Benewah County will be determined to the degree this development compliments other economic activities and the degree to which the county and the tribe match their development efforts to reach a common goal. Outside of the timber industry, communities like Tensed, Plummer and St. Maries can only benefit by direct collaboration with the tribe. Business development, transportation infrastructure, interlocking development planning and other connections are required for the remainder of Benewah County to benefit from tribal gaming and other development efforts.

In addition, tribal management of the southern reaches of Lake Coeur d'Alene presents a unique opportunity for economic development that takes advantage of both the lake and the St. Joe River resources. Numerous ideas expressed in the documentation dealt with water recreation, water front development and expansion of recreation and tourism in these areas. These are excellent ideas and tribe is now a *de facto* partner in such efforts. We strongly suggest that economic development efforts be coordinated with the tribe. Failure to do so might jeopardize economic development in the remainder of the county.

## ***Suggestions for Action***

Convene local people interested in economic development along with tribal development personnel and try to get a more systematic understanding of what is happening in the county. Perhaps something like the following:

1. Collect all the ideas, suggestions, programs and actions mentioned in one place.
2. Sort them by date and whether they address a particular community, like St. Maries, or whether they are generally applicable to the county as a whole.
3. Divide them into ideas and actions to see which have been truly tried and completed, and which were either not attempted or not finished. For example, were the sidewalks downtown upgraded? If not, was it money and is it still a good idea?
4. Which did not work or were not tried because of money. Was anything done with the report on rebuilding the downtown and waterfront?
5. Try to figure out why things worked or did not work, other than lack of money.
6. Find out which businesses that have opened in the last few years are still open and if their employment has increased or not.
7. Use the priorities already reflected in the Gem Community manual or the needs assessment to put the ideas into some priority order.
8. Do the same thing for businesses, focusing on those you think can be helped to stay in business or increase employment.
9. When this is finished, see what ideas or actions match the current resources and go from there.

## ***Conclusion***

The overall conclusion is simple. Few stones have been left unturned over the last ten years in attempts to foster economic development in Benewah County. The documents reflect this. Contained in those documents are dozens of ideas, many of them very concrete, for creating an economic development effort in the county. You do not need additional ideas. You do need a quick run through the ideas that have either never been tried or were not finished. This will provide numerous actions that can be undertaken in the short run.