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**SEEING THE COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE TREES: REBUILDING
COMMUNITIES IN THE NORTHWEST**

[**An analysis of the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative.**](#)

What do wooden sculptures in Weed, California, a trolley barn for a refurbished 1913 trolley in Astoria, Oregon, and a waterfront pathway in downtown Stevenson, Washington have in common? They are just three of the 2500 projects that are part of the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative that pumped \$1.2 billion into Northwest communities to offset the decline in timber harvests. More than that, these projects highlight the importance of building local skills and catalyzing community efforts that lead to additional projects and that may leverage millions more for local community development.

The Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative is the socioeconomic companion plan to the Northwest Forest Plan. Known also as the "Option 9" spotted owl plan, the Northwest Forest Plan was launched after the high profile, high stakes 1993 Clinton Administration Forest Summit held in Portland. The Initiative side of the plan was heralded as an innovative approach to reinventing government and dealing with administrative gridlock. It promised new forms of economic assistance to support economic adjustment and diversification in rural, timber-dependent communities, including training for displaced Northwest timber workers.

Following a two and a half year study of the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative by Forest Community Research, an independent forestry and rural policy research organization, we are learning what works and how best to help rural forest communities. These lessons have applicability today for the President's fire planning, improved government coordination, and community development in the Northwest and elsewhere.

[**"The NEAI was a stunning example of collaboration among state, local and federal governmental agencies. It was an unprecedented success and will likely mean that government cannot go back to doing business as usual.**](#)

The challenge is whether the government will stay engaged and help these communities,” said Jonathan Kusel, executive director of Forest Community Research.

For example, one of the most powerful lessons from the study is that investments in local leadership, and collaboration and community skills—what is termed “soft infrastructure”—can leverage far more than good working relationships. The Astoria trolley barn that was funded by the Forest Service came on the heels of over 3000 volunteer hours devoted by local residents to restore the trolley. Local volunteers run the trolley that links Columbia riverfront development that is a mainstay of the town’s revitalization efforts.

Weed, California offers another powerful example. A \$10,000 Rural Community Assistance grant from the Forest Service led to wooden sculptures erected in the historic downtown area. These sculptures not only contributed to revitalizing the downtown area but encouraged dozens of locals to get involved in painting murals, planting trees, landscaping, and stimulated a vibrant local conversation and planning for future economic development. The lesson is clear: the importance of soft infrastructure investment vastly exceeded the three percent it made up of the \$1.2 billion in total investments in the region.

The Waterfront pathway in Stevenson, Washington, constructed for tourists and residents alike, has also generated a lot of local support. Though the contribution of this project to additional economic development is less clear, this project highlights another powerful lesson from study of the Initiative: the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative created effective new institutional and intergovernmental partnerships, an environment of collaboration, and a new way of doing business that improved service delivery in the region. The pathway was developed with support from the Port of Skamania County, the City of Stevenson, the Forest Service, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, and private sources. The Initiative powerfully changed the culture of state and federal agencies from that of going it alone on projects to working together and leveraging projects jointly. This played out in communities in all three states.

Kusel added, “These programs worked because they built community facilities and people’s skills—and the programs didn’t destroy communities’ cultures, they built on them.”

These and more lessons are documented in the \$600,000 study that adopted a novel two part approach involving an institutional analysis and study of 35 communities in 31 individual case studies. Fourteen case studies were conducted in Oregon, ten in Washington, and seven in California—a distribution that roughly corresponds to the total Initiative dollars spent in each state. Six case studies involved Native American tribes. Eschewing the more common evaluation techniques of examining aggregated data at the county or regional level to assess program effectiveness, Forest Community Research researchers fanned out across the region to talk to real people to assess the effectiveness of projects individually and collectively in communities where the “rubber met the road.” Set within broad regional and historical contexts, initiative projects were examined in terms of how they affect five dimensions of community capacity: (1) *physical capital*, (2) *financial capital*, (3) *human capital*, (4) *cultural capital*, and (5) *social capital*.

To understand the effects of the diverse community development approaches employed in NEAI, Forest Community Research examined NEAI projects collectively in the following categories: workforce development/training (unique because of the effort to link training to ecosystem work), leadership development/human capacity-building or soft infrastructure development, and industrial development and small business loan programs. This classification of types of government interventions facilitated examination of particular patterns of community development support and their effectiveness. The effectiveness of each of these development approaches (as well as the integration of these approaches) and the factors that contributed to project success or failure were then assessed.

The 14 lessons learned with policy recommendations developed from this study are useful for developing more effective and efficient programs to improve worker and community well-being. They provide lessons for communities elsewhere that are facing similar economic and social transitions, conditions of decline and under-investment, or looking for ways to improve well-being.

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