

Washington Island Economic Development Opportunity

Submitted by Robert Cornell

In June of 2010, a group of Island citizens met with Glacierland Resource Conservation and Development Council (RC&D) personnel and USFS Wood Education and Resource Center consultants at the Washington Island Electric Cooperative. The purpose of this meeting was to discuss producing products on the Island using Island Resources (largely wood) that could be consumed on the Island by either residents or visitors. Wood pelletization, combined heat and power boiler systems, and district heating for public buildings utilizing pellets, chips, or cordwood were the primary projects that began the discussion. Into the meeting, however, a discussion/brainstorming session began where many different ideas for products, services, etc. were thrown on the table.

It became clear in this meeting that there were plenty of ideas out there that really needed to be fleshed out from an economic feasibility and practicality standpoint and it was suggested that this type of project would make for an appropriate Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG) proposal. An inquiry with USDA Rural Development confirmed that a project to develop economic ideas fit in the requirements of the grant and the grant application was submitted in the spring of 2011. In spite of poor odds, Glacierland RC&D was officially awarded the grant in August 2011 to conduct an assessment of economic development opportunities on Washington Island and identify sectors/businesses to expand or develop which would contribute to the economic stability of the Island.

Q. Would you briefly explain this project?

A. Glacierland received the Grant from USDA Rural Development to conduct an assessment of economic development opportunities on Washington Island and to identify economic sectors and/or specific businesses which could be successfully developed or expanded to contribute to the eco-

economic growth and stability of the Island. The economic feasibility of several of these business opportunities would be evaluated, and action plans would be developed for the steps needed to find entrepreneurs for the most promising opportunities and to provide support where needed for success.

Q. Who is Glacierland RC&D?

A. Glacierland RC&D is a non-profit rural development council based out of Green Bay that covers Northeastern Wisconsin counties, including Door County. They facilitate a variety of rural development projects through grant writing, analysis, feasibility studies, and a number of other services.

Q. What has happened since the award of the Grant?

A. On September 12 of this year, Glacierland representatives Greg Hines and Don Peterson along with Terry Mace (WDNR Forest Products Marketing Specialist) met with Robert Cornell, Jerry Maiers (Chair of the Washington Island Economic Development Committee), Joel Gunnlaugsson (Town Chairman), and several other committee members, interested residents and business persons to discuss the scope and objectives of the project, as well as the methods to be used to obtain community participation in the identification, prioritization, and evaluation of ideas for business development. The following questions and answers address many of the points discussed.

Specific business development opportunities were also discussed at the meeting. These will be the basis for an initial list of opportunities that will be expanded and embellished in later meetings involving participation by interested community members.

Q. What business categories will be candidates for this assessment?

A. Categories discussed in the meeting included:

- Products that could be pro-

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duced on the Island for both residents and visitors. Also, products that could be produced for export, if economically feasible. Agricultural and wood products were emphasized.

- Services that could be expanded or developed for residents and/or visitors.

- New events, workshops, and seminars for residents and/or visitors.

- Other business opportunities that would be a good fit for the Island. For example, call centers located on the Island were discussed in this regard.

Marketing and sales of products and services could be by e-commerce or traditional means. The list of categories might be expanded based on ideas of other community members.

Q. What steps will be involved in this project?

A. First, forums would be provided for community input. Business opportunities identified by community members would be consolidated, refined and vetted for general feasibility. Several would be

selected for more comprehensive analysis of associated markets for the product or service, required expertise, minimum scale of operation, profitability, and other factors necessary for success. Action plans would be developed for the most promising of these opportunities.

Q. Who will be doing the work for this project?

A. The work will be a collaborative effort between Island residents, both year round and seasonal, Glacierland, the Washington Island Economic Development Committee, and specific industry technical experts as needed.

Q. How will identified business opportunities be selected for further analysis of economic feasibility and development of action plans?

A. Criteria will be developed as the project proceeds, and might include elements such as synergy with current Island enterprises, untapped market for the product or service, compatibility with a yet to be defined "Washington Island Brand," potential profitability, ability to be expanded to a larger scale, and availability of local expertise or raw materials.

Q. What were some of the ideas that have been discussed?

A. Ideas discussed at the meeting included:

- Use of Island wood to produce novelty wood products, outdoor wood furniture, firewood, and mulch.

- Use of agricultural acreage to produce a variety of products to be sold on the Island.

- Packaging of Island products in gift boxes for sale in Island stores or by e-commerce.

- A number of additional specific events that would attract residents and visitors during traditional down times.

- Internet based individual businesses.

- Service businesses to support businesses created or expanded through this process.

Many more ideas were discussed in much more specificity than could be described here. A more comprehensive and detailed Opportunity List is posted on the Project page at www.glacierlandr-cd.org. The list will be expanded and refined as additional public input is received.

Q. Will work on this project be compatible with other economic development initiatives?

A. Project efforts will be coordinated with or will compliment work already in progress through individual efforts, the Town Board, or the Washington Island Economic Development Committee.

Q. What is the particular strength of this project?

A. Studies to date regarding Island economic development have ended primarily with compilations of survey data and/or lists of recommendations. This project is expected to go significantly farther in that it will provide an action plan, as well

as approximate the potential financial impact on the entrepreneur and the Island, for each of the most promising business opportunities. It is hoped that these additional work products will enable identifying prospective entrepreneurs and providing the motivation, encouragement and support to help these opportunities become realities.

Q. How can you and others get involved?

A. Do the ideas identified above or on the Opportunities List interest you? Is there another idea that you have been thinking of, but aren't sure where to go or what the next step is? This project could be an opportunity to get help fleshing out your idea, evaluating its feasibility, and determining what to do next.

Contact Robert Cornell, Jerry Maiers, Joel Gunnlaugsson or Randy Sorensen or stop in at the Washington Island Electric Cooperative and fill out an interest/participation/suggestion sheet or access it online on the "Projects" page at www.glacierlandr-cd.org. Or, come to one of a series of small meetings, yet to be scheduled, to discuss your ideas and those of others. (See gray box below for contact information.)

Q. When will this project be complete?

A. Our expectation is that the project funded by this grant is just the start of an ongoing economic revitalization of Washington Island. We are trying to achieve the delicate balance of economic, population age, and societal stability without threatening the uniqueness of the Island. The initial phase covered by this grant will be completed by next spring, hopefully to be followed by additional phases to address additional economic opportunities. We welcome everyone's ideas and participation in this project.

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