

OPB Program Focuses on Rural Economy Issues, live from Newport **Terry Dillman, April 21, 2010 (Newport News-Times)**



Dave Miller, left, and Emily Harris, hosts of the Oregon Public Broadcasting radio show “Think Out Loud,” share a laugh during the introduction to the show’s broadcast recorded live Monday night at Café Mundo. A standing-room-only crowd gathered for the first in a series of forums in a new OPB initiative called the Rural Economy Project. (Photo by Terry Dillman)

Newport served as the site for the initial forum about the economy in rural Oregon as Oregon Public Broadcasting (OPB) launched its Rural Economy Project (REP) Monday night when “Think Out Loud” broadcast live from Cafe Mundo in the city’s Nye Beach district.

A standing-room-only crowd gathered upstairs and downstairs to listen to and participate in a discussion about “lifestyle entrepreneurs” and their influence on rural coastal communities, as well as the overall economic situation.

Emily Harris and David Miller—hosts of the radio show promoted as “a daily conversation about news and issues” and “the talk show that listens”—engaged the audience and guests in a lively discussion about the coastal economy, specifically efforts by business and community leaders to brand and market the coast as a place to live, work, and play, converting tourists into residents who bring their businesses and money with them to stay.

This was the first of a series of “Think Out Loud” shows that will focus on engaging business owners and other folks in rural communities in discussions about rural development opportunities, and how rural communities are responding in the wake of the ebbing recession. OPB is leading this effort in collaboration with the Rural Development Initiative, Sustainable Northwest, and The Oregon Consortium/Workforce Alliance “to raise visibility on rural issues and provide critical resources for employment, business development, and networking opportunities.”

Opportunity went on the air Monday night, and Newport residents took full advantage of it.

The show featured four scheduled on-air guests: Michael Gibbons, artist and proprietor of Gallery Michael Gibbons in Toledo; John Lavrakas, founder of Newport-based Advanced Research Corporation; Todd Davidson, executive director of the Oregon Tourism Commission and CEO of Travel Oregon; and Bruce Weber, director of the Rural Studies Program at Oregon State University.

The show also featured comments and questions from the audience in a highly interactive exchange.

Lifestyle Choices

Gibbons and Lavrakass talked about what drew them to the central Oregon coast, how it has influenced them, and how they have influenced the community in return.

“Toledo was a miserable wreck when I moved here,” said Gibbons, noting he wanted to leave big cities behind and have a little studio close to the land that provides many of the tableaus for his paintings. The year was 1981, and the city, he said, “was at its lowest ebb.”

He described his purchase of an old vicarage and several other buildings and refurbishing them to create the centerpiece of what is now Toledo’s designated arts district, noting that he financed it all through sales of his paintings. It’s a transformative project that’s still in progress.

“Art is never finished,” Gibbons observed.

“You do what you have to do,” he said in response to a question. “I never thought of myself as an entrepreneur. I suppose I am. I have been responsible for a lot of change in Toledo that wasn’t there before.”

Lavrakas called his move to the coast “a leap of faith,” especially making the switch from employee to starting his own business. He now has three full-time employees and is focusing on the ocean technology issues.

But lifestyle entrepreneurship isn’t particularly about job creation. “My intention was not to create a bunch of jobs,” Gibbons said, noting that his focus was on keeping his neighborhood amenable to staying there.

He bought several buildings across the street from the vicarage to keep them from being razed for a low-income housing project. “It was either that or watch the neighborhood go downhill,” he said.

The discussion took a turn as other folks weighed in with concerns about finding family wage jobs and affordable housing, access to health care and child care, and other problems associated with a rural coastal economy. And it threatened to drift farther after Miller played an audio clip from University of Oregon economist Tim Duy, who said marketing schemes aimed at attracting lifestyle entrepreneurs “are “largely ineffective” and entrepreneurship is “not likely to take hold” in rural areas like the central Oregon coast.

Weber, too, seemed dismissive, saying he’s “not a fan of transformative strategies” because “none of them guarantee success.”

The discussion remained on the multiple challenges coastal communities face. Until Onno Husing, executive director of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association (OCZMA),

stepped to the microphone.

Prior Knowledge

Husing and others believe the Oregon coast is an ideal place for lifestyle entrepreneurs and knowledge workers—those who could live and work anywhere but choose to live on the Oregon coast for the lifestyle it offers.

Monday night's broadcast provided a chance to build on what Husing calls "a quiet revolution or renaissance" as accomplished and often well-heeled folks move to the coast, run their small businesses, participate in local politics, volunteer, and "slowly, but surely" help to change things for the better.

A number of them, like Gibbons and Lavrakas, are already here.

"They're making a difference," Husing said on the show. "It helps everybody if we do it right. The coast has a great future, and if we work together, we can have a great future for everyone."

For more information about the Rural Economy Project, contact coordinator Cassie Wieden at 503-293-1920 or cwieden@opb.org. To listen to this program, access the archives at www.opb.org/thinkoutloud.

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