



Presented by The Sierra Fund
November 8-9, 2010
Miners Foundry, Nevada City, California

WORKSHOP NOTES

Stimulating Gold Country Economies Stone Hall, Monday November 8, 2:30 pm

Notes taken reflect the best effort to capture what was said in presentations and in the discussion time following. They are presented here in order to encourage further discussion about these matters. These notes do not necessarily reflect the views of The Sierra Fund staff, board or funders.

Jonathan Kusel of Sierra Institute for Community and Environment facilitated this panel discussion and Joe Heckel of the Grass Valley Community Development Agency, Reinette Senum of Nevada City Council and Steve Wilensky of the Calaveras County Board of Supervisors presented.

Jonathan Kusel outlined how this workshop addresses how to reclaim our communities in ways beyond public health and the environment.

Joe Heckel, Community Development Agency, City of Grass Valley

Grass Valley's heritage lies in mining. The city evolved around a number of operating hard rock mines, most prominently the Empire Mine. Since the close of the mining industry the town has continued to evolve.

Today, there is a dwindling base of vacant properties in the city. In order to allow opportunities for business, industrial and residential development in town it is important to identify and plan for what to do with vacant "brownfields" properties that are impacted by historic mining.

The city wants to be proactive by identifying sites that have contamination, and then working with agencies that have oversight to secure funds for cleanup and redevelopment. It is important to identify the kind of contamination on the site because that plays into how they can be developed.

The city has dealt with a number of impacts from historic mining. The Drew Tunnel discharged half a million gallons into the city sewer plant. Other impacts include mine shafts uncovered in the course of construction projects, mine discharge into Memorial Park, soil contamination including arsenic, lead and mercury, the Sierra Terrace subdivision project held up, and a Habitat for Humanity street widening project that uncovered three mine shafts.

Grass Valley has received a \$400,000 grant from the EPA Brownfields program for assessment of properties for hazardous materials including mine waste. This project will evaluate what the contaminated properties are within city limits, and identify redevelopment opportunities. Brownfields funds will be used to remove constraints from key infill properties. The program is also a great opportunity to think creatively about how to invest more in the community.

Reinette Senum, City Council, Nevada City

This presentation showed how the toxic legacy of mining is one of the best things Nevada City has going for it in terms of local economy.

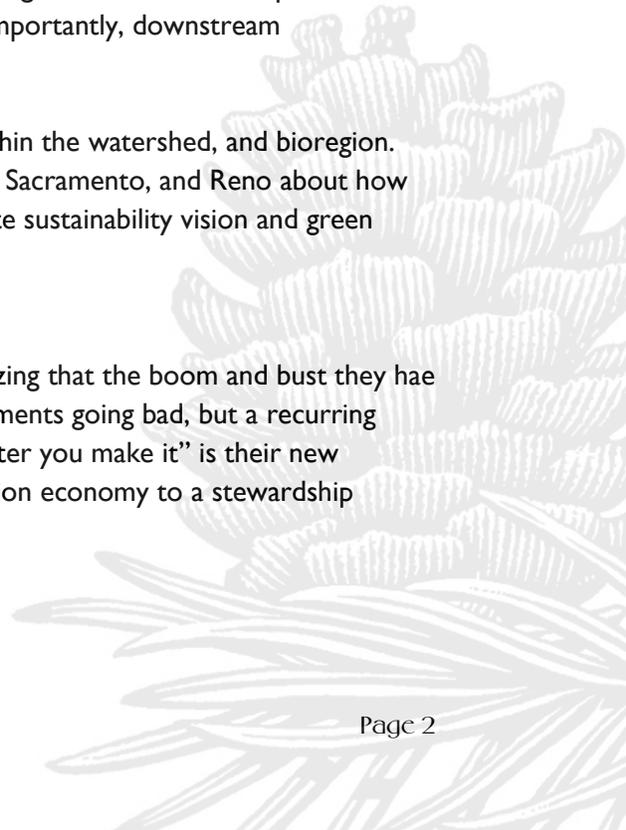
The Nevada City Sustainability Vision aims to make the town a model for sustainable living and economic practices. This vision has been developed with community groups, adopted by the city council, and earlier this year was the focus of a high powered meeting in San Francisco.

Mine remediation is central to the sustainability vision, since there is a wealth of opportunity in Nevada City for sites to clean up—attracting funding streams, stimulating new jobs, and new technologies. Nevada City could become a model for sustainable reclamation of legacy mining impacts, since communities across the nation and other places in the world are facing the same issues. A powerful project would draw in people from around the country, and most importantly, downstream communities.

With this kind of project, it is important to work collaboratively within the watershed, and bioregion. The Sustainability Vision has germinated discussion in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Reno about how to create a “green corridor” from San Francisco to Reno to promote sustainability vision and green tourism.

Steve Wilensky, Calaveras County Supervisor

In Supervisor Wilensky’s district in Calaveras County, they are realizing that the boom and bust they have witnessed over the past 50 years is not a series of economic experiments going bad, but a recurring cycle, and that a whole new idea is needed. “Clean up your mess after you make it” is their new economic theory—in other words, moving from a resource extraction economy to a stewardship economy.



Challenges the County faces are relatively unresponsive federal land agencies, disinterested downstream communities, and deep political divisions about who is to blame about the distress everyone is in. It is time to stop assigning blame, and instead decide what to do next.

To be successful, people must realize that neither forestry, mine cleanup, fish or any one piece is the whole issue—if we do that, we cannot pick ourselves up, the next round of resource exploitation will be right on us. We must understand that all issues are interconnected, and approach the solution as a single community representing the “Range of Light.”

The county is moving forward, gathering all different groups of interest including tribes, watershed organizations, jobseekers, and contractors to address a triple bottom line: economy, environment, people. We must address poverty as part of the triple bottom line. And downstream communities must be engaged: 3% of the people in California cannot repair the problems of a century of aggressive resource extraction—the other 97% of Californians should help. Their investment in our region is the basis for the planet’s survival.

One successful example of this vision moving forward is the CHIPS project—its motto is “doing good with wood.” This project relies on complex alliances of people and funding sources. It puts unemployed and tribal people back to work restoring the forest. Involves environmental groups in training the forest crews, to make the best use of partnerships and knowledge.

Discussion and Questions

A Job Training grant would be a great way to stimulate our economy, and start getting things cleaned up. Sierra College should be a partner in this, as well as private industry.

The Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative spent a great deal of money to put people to work in the woods. The project was a failure because there was not a corresponding investment in the landscape, or the people who were going back to work—the project needed to last longer than just one year.

How do we make sure, as we’re talking about our opportunities, that these communities actually benefit—that a strong economy is actually accomplished?

To do this, communities must be better organized, they must present a vision to the rest of California about what they want to see happen, and what they are asking people to do. For example, 1.4 million people drink water out of Mokulomne River. 10 cents per month from each person could be used to reemploy people and restore the environment in the headwaters. Downstream people need to pay price for the resources that come out of the Sierra.

We need to make the case about how much it costs us if we do not address mining toxins. Cleaning this up is an investment in OURSELVES and our future. The view that we are all in it together helps build relationships, and build trust, since “what benefits me benefits you.”

There needs to be an easy contact for remediation and contamination projects, an easy contact that can help the city or a landowner. The Sierra Fund could play that role.

Banks should be an ally for addressing legacy contamination, since banks need to buy in on every property turnover. Consider a standard procedure for every sale in the Gold Country. This could address both contamination and financing.

How do we deal with silos? Getting a problem property on the path to remediation is difficult.

The CA Department of Conservation Abandoned Mines Lands Forum is an effective vehicle for bringing together parties around this issue.

The Glencoe Forest Restoration Project, which involves both BLM and private land is an on-the-ground project that brings odd partnerships together. On a small scale, it proves that local people can take care of what needs to be restored. But projects like this are not a real success until people take the model and use it on thousands of acres.

We need to get organized as a REGION—John Muir isn't here anymore, we need to find that voice inside us.

We're all part of the problem so there should be no finger pointing—all we can do at this point is move on. Lawsuits are expensive and the expense is not just dollars but destroyed communities.

We cannot make projections about costs and values if we do not have research on what to compare it to. The scientific method requires hard data and pursuing truth without opinions. Generalizations are real problems. We need to get the academic community to join us in addressing this with real research.

We also need to keep in mind that if the science isn't there yet, it doesn't mean that there isn't an issue. We simply don't have epidemiological data.

Preserving our history is a key component in our economic vision, but preserving toxins is not.

A recent survey/assessment was done of people in Switzerland—in order to save communities and environment in the Alps.

Good paying jobs for the community are key to economic success. To do this, work on job training, build trade councils, apprentice programs, “earn while you learn” programs, and make sure the jobs created pay good wages.

