

Final Report on the 2005 Subregional Outreach Sessions

Introduction

During the summer and early fall of 2005, community outreach sessions were held in each of the Sierra Nevada Conservancy's six subregions to introduce the Conservancy (SNC) and to initiate dialogue with local governments, stakeholders, and other interested parties. County supervisors representing the various subregions on the SNC Board, in coordination with Resources Agency staff, hosted workshops in Bishop, Susanville, Sonora, Fresno, El Dorado Hills, and Quincy. The Sierra Business Council, a Truckee-based nonprofit association of businesses, agencies, organizations, and individuals working to promote the social, environmental, and financial health of the Sierra, provided both staff and substantial related support in planning, publicizing, and coordinating the sessions. Staff from the California Tahoe Conservancy facilitated the sessions and assisted in recording participant comments during the listening sessions.

Invitations to attend outreach sessions were mailed to all local elected officials within the Sierra Nevada region. These included county supervisors, city council members, and elected officers of local entities such as fire, irrigation, and community service districts. State and Federal officials also received notification by mail. Public service announcements and area-wide notice posting ensured wider public outreach. E-mail and word of mouth also played important roles in spreading the information to nonprofits and tribal organizations, as well as to ranchers, farmers, business leaders and other persons likely to be interested.

The outreach sessions followed a consistent agenda: (1) introductory comments by policymakers on the significance of the sessions; (2) background descriptions of the SNC's legislation, purpose, and governance; (3) summary of the nine program areas in which the SNC has been directed to focus its efforts; and (4) listening sessions

at various separate stations, where participants shared their thoughts and ideas regarding the future role of the SNC. Support materials, including maps and SNC legislation, were available to all participants. All public comments made in the listening sessions were recorded for reporting to the SNC board; these comments have been posted on the SNC website.

From the start, the sessions were designed to initiate dialogue with stakeholders and interested parties. Facilitators explained to the participants that the initial outreach sessions would help to lay the groundwork for strategic planning and development of program guidelines, but that both processes would continue to rely on extensive public input and comment.

Findings and Observations

All six outreach sessions were well-attended, with 75 to 150 people at each. Participants included local government officials and staff, representatives of agriculture and business organizations, environmental groups, land trusts, and tribal organizations, as well as interested private citizens. Participation was cooperative and engaging, with most attendees expressing a high degree of interest in the SNC and its role in the greater Sierra region. As would be expected, the issues and concerns raised by participants reflected considerable diversity of outlook. There were, however, a number of recognizable themes woven throughout the six sessions.

First, there was near-unanimity in the desire to see the SNC, once in action, helping local governments, nonprofits and tribal organizations to implement existing (and future) plans and programs through local assistance grants. In areas of the region without existing plans and programs, there was an expressed interest in developing plans to provide a framework in which projects may move forward. This reflects a visible consensus in the region in favor of maintaining local governance and authority, coupled with an acknowledgement of the need for funding to complete projects. There was widespread understanding of the need to build capacity in local governments and nonprofits, increasing their ability to carry out grant-funded projects. This includes the provision of technical expertise to local players in

the identification and scoping of projects, as well as assistance in the grant application process, and in the completion of environmental review documents. In addition, participants expressed a strong interest in sharing local knowledge and expertise in order to build capacity within the Conservancy itself.

Second, there was widespread support for programs that would address sustainable forestry practices. Again, participants expressed a desire to see such programs implemented through existing fire districts to ensure local involvement and supervision. On a more regional level, participants noted the opportunity for cogeneration facilities utilizing the biomass produced in fuels reduction activities.

Many participants suggested that the SNC is in a unique position to address regional needs by bridging jurisdictional boundaries. This regional approach was referenced in a number of contexts, including watershed-based planning, multi-jurisdiction visitor centers, regional trails projects, and scientific research. Many individuals cited the need to compile existing research and plans quickly so that the SNC may better identify gaps in knowledge and focus its efforts where they will be most useful rather than duplicating prior work. Some noted the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project (SNEP) and the Fire and Resource Assessment Program (FRAP), hoping that these comprehensive efforts would be built upon rather than repeated or duplicated. The need for a regional Geographic Information Systems (GIS) database was repeatedly mentioned.

Community development strategies figured prominently in many discussions, with a particular focus on building economically sustainable communities. Recommendations were quite diverse, but centered around integrating natural resources, agriculture, tourism, and recreation to establish a place-based heritage economy.

While some participants were at first confused about the mission and directives of the SNC, others – especially those from local land trusts and organizations such as historic preservation groups, arts councils, and community development programs -- displayed good familiarity with the SNC's unique legislation. Many of these representatives had participated in the process which led to the formation of the SNC. They came prepared to recommend programs, projects, and specific

actions. They expressed an interest in future, ongoing involvement with the SNC, and how their ideas might be incorporated in the planning process.

Last, place-based values, and the desire to retain local character, were consistently identified as key issues. Accommodation of regional needs will require sensitivity as strategic planning goes ahead, and as program guidelines are developed. Program guidelines, in particular, will need to provide flexibility in order to respond to changing regional and subregional contexts.

Overall, the outreach sessions reflected a strong willingness by residents and local governments to work with the SNC to help preserve and enhance the environment, economy, and quality of life throughout the Sierra. Despite, or perhaps because of, the well-known differences in outlook, all participants attended with the intent of expressing their concerns, and sharing thoughts. These participatory sessions established a strong foundation for the SNC to build upon as it moves ahead.

A complete transcript of public comment is available on the Sierra Nevada Conservancy website at:
www.sierranevadaconservancy.ca.gov

Recommendations

From the facilitators' standpoint, the experience of the outreach sessions suggests the following recommendations for the future:

1. Continue, strengthen, and expand current dialogue with local governments, nonprofits, tribal organizations, and interested individuals within the near term. Failure to act in a timely manner increases the likelihood that parties who are currently interest and engaged parties might become alienated.
2. Implement on-the-ground, accessible workshops during the SNC's strategic planning process. These workshops should make use of the physical presence of SNC staff within Sierra communities, at least for temporary stints.

3. Deploy SNC staff – and, ultimately, offices -- at strategic locations around the Sierra Region to ensure accessibility to partners and constituencies.
4. Develop program guidelines that are respectful of, and provide the flexibility to accommodate, local needs.
5. Emphasize implementation of locally-adopted plans and programs which are consistent with the SNC's mission.
6. Utilize innovative and technologically advanced communication systems between the SNC and partner organizations to overcome the difficulties which are inherent in such a broad service area.
7. Ensure consistency and accuracy in the dissemination of public information about the SNC. The SNC website should be the one central source for such information. Information needs to be updated regularly, using a well thought-out and systematic approach.

-- Ray Lacey