

**Benton Community Visioning Meeting
February 28, 2008 Meeting Summary**

Prepared by:



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Introduction

On February 28, 2008 nearly 50 Benton area residents and local agency representatives attended the Benton Community Visioning meeting at the Benton Community Center. The meeting was designed to solicit community input about issues and concerns regarding the future of Benton, inform the creation of a land use planning vision, and suggest related transportation improvements for the town over the next 20-25 years. The meeting was hosted by the Mono County Planning Department and Caltrans with consulting assistance provided by MIG, Inc. MIG is a consulting firm based in Berkeley that provides planning, design, communications and technology services. MIG recently completed a similar process for the Town of Chalfant in 2007. Mono County secured support for the project through a technical assistance grant from Caltrans.

Meeting Purpose and Outcomes

The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Discuss current conditions and opportunities in Benton
- Review Best Practices in rural planning
- Develop a vision and guiding principles for Benton

Welcome and Introductions

Hap Hazard, Mono County Board of Supervisors, called the meeting to order, briefly described the purpose and goals for of the meeting, and introduced the project team, which included representatives from MIG, Mono County and Caltrans. Hap emphasized that the visioning process will focus on guiding development over the next 25 years and provide an opportunity for community members to be involved in shaping how that development happens. Hap introduced Joan Chaplick of MIG as the process facilitator.

Process Description

Joan described the timeline for the visioning workshop and thanked Benton community members for their participation, noting Benton's unique proactive planning position. In contrast to many rural communities that craft a community vision in response to an economic downturn or natural disaster, Benton community members are participating in the process while conditions are stable and no specific project is driving the decision making. Following a general overview, Joan introduced Greg Newbry, Mono County Senior Planner, who explained how the visioning results will be integrated into the County planning processes. Greg explained that the visioning process could take three to six months, and that it would take another year to complete the environmental review and incorporate the results of the process into the County General Plan. Following Greg, Forest Becket, Caltrans Community Planner, described how the visioning results would be integrated into future Caltrans planning documents and processes. Forest highlighted how the visioning project is part of a larger Caltrans effort to integrate multi-jurisdictional transportation and land use planning decisions.

Best Practices in Rural Planning

Joan presented a case study in rural community planning highlighting Miner County, South Dakota. Miner County is a rural farming community located, 100 miles northwest of Sioux Falls, with a shrinking population, dwindling economy, and increasing poverty. In response to these concerns, the County received grant funding to undertake a community planning process. Their process identified four guiding principles that would be key to the community's success:

- Plug leaks in local economy; put money back into the community
- Support existing businesses
- Encourage new local enterprise
- Recruit compatible new businesses.

The County embarked on a number of activities that supported these principles, including revising land use zoning and the permitting process, facilitating the approval of mixed use income and housing types, establishing growth boundaries, and encouraging local business ownership. A bowling alley and Rural Learning Center have been developed as a direct result of the community planning process.

In reviewing rural planning efforts, Joan explained that communities have utilized the following strategies to improve local economic conditions and maintain a high quality of life:

- Preserving farmland
- Coordinating with Public Land Managers
- Working with developers on master planned communities
- Stimulating tourism
- Coordinating with other communities

Communities that succeed in these efforts typically:

- Engage an active group of citizens committed to process
- Recognize and value community assets
- Keep properties in local ownership
- Keep local dollars in the local economy
- Keep residential development from fragmenting quality agricultural lands
- Seek out businesses that are compatible with the community
- Need stable population base to keep activities viable
- Consider zoning changes in some areas to achieve community goals

Current Conditions and Opportunities

Following the discussion of best practices in rural planning, Joan reviewed the current condition of the Benton community. The review of these conditions was designed to encourage a preliminary discussion about a community vision.

Regional Context

Benton sits at the intersection of two major highways, US Hwy 6 and SR 120. Interregional truck traffic frequents Highway 6 year round, while SR 120 is a seasonal road that accommodates tourists and local travelers. In general, the regional population is stable and aging. The percentage of adults with school age children is decreasing.

Local Context

The population of Benton is approximately 350. In 2000 the median age was 39.5 and the median income in the area was less than Mono County overall.

Community Facilities

There are a number of community services and facilities in Benton, including:

- Mono County Road Shop
- Caltrans Maintenance facility
- Benton Senior Center
- Community park
- Benton Transfer Station
- Elementary School
- Library
- White Mountain Fire Protection District Station
- U.S. Post Office

Local Commercial

There are a small collection of local businesses including a corner store, restaurant and gas station.

Cultural and Historic Resources

Benton's history as a regional hub during the heyday of mining is evident today at the historic Benton Hot Springs resort and surrounding buildings.

Tribal Properties

The Benton-Paiute tribe owns a number of properties in the area, including the corner store/restaurant and gas station. The development of these areas could significantly impact the future look and feel of Benton.

Recreational Resources

Benton is conveniently located to world-class hiking, wildlife viewing, and other recreational opportunities on the expansive surrounding public lands.

Key Questions

Following the discussion of current condition and opportunities, Joan posed a number of topical questions to the group regarding the future of Benton. The topics and key questions are listed below:

Economic Development

- What types of business and economic development activities does Benton want to encourage?
- What types of activity do we want to discourage?

Transportation

- What is the role of transportation in Benton's future?
- What local circulation improvements are needed?
- How does the state highway system in Benton best serve and balance the needs of the travelling public, the community, and movement of goods?

Services and Amenities

- What services do we need or want?
- What amenities do we want for our residents, and what's needed to attract new residents and businesses?

Community Collaboration

- Who should be participating?
- How do we keep people active and engaged in this process?

Issues, Assets and Opportunities

Joan asked participants to talk generally about current issues and opportunities in Benton. What issues did the community need to address now and what issues would be of concern in the future? Items discussed are described below and depicted in Figure 1 (page 7).

Transportation Issues

Benton's location is defined by the intersection of US Highway 6 and State Route 120, roadways that facilitate local, interregional, and regional traffic. Meeting attendees recognized the strategic value of Benton's proximity to these significant roadways and expressed a desire to collaborate with Caltrans to improve public safety in Benton. There were specific comments made regarding:

- Unsafe driving speeds
- Safety issues related to truck parking and chain control along Highway 6
- Bike and pedestrian improvements
- Potential to keep SR 120 open year round
- Potential rerouting of Highway 6 to bypass Benton

Water supply and infrastructure

Residents repeatedly emphasized that any future development must be compatible with existing water supply, and that maintenance and preservation of the existing water supply is strongly valued. Furthermore, meeting attendees felt strongly that future growth should be sensitive to the long-term water supply for the area.

Parcel size

Existing parcel sizes were mentioned as a limiting factor to future development. Participants appeared open to reviewing parcel sizes if it would help increase opportunities for development aligned with the community's vision and quality of life. Others communicated a preference for large lots where they can raise and keep animals, especially outside the core community area.

Workforce Housing

Many Benton residents work outside of Benton in either Bishop or Mammoth. Meeting attendees expressed a desire to develop housing for people who will live and work in the Benton area. There was a strong desire expressed to develop housing for permanent residents, rather than second homes.

Assets and Opportunities

Meeting attendees noted Benton's physical location and surroundings numerous times as elements that can help lead to greater prosperity and quality of life for Benton residents. Developing existing community features, such as the historic district, while making strategic efforts to support a tourist economy through the development of a truck stop or other means was mentioned. Residents expressed a desire to encourage the growth of local businesses that can support both local and tourism related needs.

The lack of impending development pressure in the area was cited as an advantage for the development of a strong shared community vision.

Meeting attendees also expressed a strong desire to maintain limited and strategic access to surrounding public open space while taking every effort to safeguard the local groundwater supply.

Developing a Community Vision

Joan transitioned the group from the discussion of community assets, issues, and opportunities to a discussion of developing a vision for Benton 20-25 years into the future. The vision statement will describe the qualities and characteristics that community residents desire for the future. Development and land use planning decisions will be scaled and designed to achieve this vision. Participants described a community vision where:

- There are increased services, infrastructure and amenities. Participants mentioned medical, fire, and law enforcement services as well as general service and support retail amenities found in many successful small communities. As an example, hair salon, truck stop, restaurant and floral shop were mentioned. The need for a local cemetery was also identified.

- Residents desire a strong school, with a gymnasium to support a variety of recreation activities.
- Residents also want increased transportation options.

Summary and Next Steps

Community members that attended the Benton Community Visioning meeting demonstrated significant interest in continuing their involvement in the ongoing planning process. In coordination with County and Caltrans staff, the MIG consulting team will design a charrette-style workshop that will take place on June 11. At the workshop, residents will be able to review a variety of land use and transportation improvement scenarios and provide their input and preferences regarding these concepts and options.

BENTON

FEBRUARY 28, 2008

OPPORTUNITIES

- INCREASE LOCAL SPENDING
 - ↳ CREATE BIZ OPPS
- LAND EXCHANGES
- TRUCK STOP
- ARCHITECTURE GUIDELINES
- DEVELOP TOURISM ECONOMY
 - ↳ COUNTY/REGIONAL M&B
 - ↳ INCREASE/EXPAND AMENITIES
- MAINTAIN ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS
- PROMOTE UNIQUE FEATURES

ASSETS

- AGRICULTURE
- TOURISM
 - WILD HORSES!
 - BOUNDARY PEAK!
- ACCESS TO PUBLIC LANDS
 - ↳ RECREATION
- LITTLE DUT. PRESSURE
- VIEWS & NIGHT SKIES
- GROUNDWATER
- LARGE LOT SIZE *SPACE!*
- RURAL

DON'T OVERDO IT!

BE STRATEGIC! COORDINATED

ISSUES

- TRAFFIC
 - ✓ FUTURE PROJECTIONS
 - ✓ CAPACITY
 - ✓ MOBILITY
 - ✓ 120 YEAR ROUND?
 - ✓ ROUTE 6 BYPASS? *ISSUES*
 - ✓ BIKE & PEDESTRIAN
- TRUCK PARKING ON HWY 6
 - ↳ IDLING!
- GROUND H₂O SUPPLY
 - ↳ MAINTAIN, PROTECT
- WORKFORCE HOUSING
- PARCEL SIZE
 - ✓ BIG ENOUGH FOR ANIMALS
- CALTRANS CHAIN CONTROL AREA
- NEED BETTER INTERNET ACCESS

AMENITIES

- SCHOOLS
- FIRE/SAFETY
- INCREASE TRANSPORT OPTIONS
- GYM FOR SCHOOL
- SERVICES
 - ↳ HAIR SALON *FISCAL*
- ARTS
- COUNTY CEMETARY

FIGURE 1