

Outpost Guide: Willits Chapter
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Background

I moved with my wife and six-year old twin boys to Willits on August 1, 2004. Willits is a small town in Mendocino County, California. The population of the greater Willits area (zip 95490) is ca.13,000, with about 90,000 in the county. Willits sits within the Little Lake Valley at about 1400 ft in elevation between ridges of the Coastal Range. Formerly occupied by hunter-gatherer Pomo tribes, the economy was largely agrarian based during late 19th and early 20th Century. Following the Great Depression, forestry dominated until the 1980s. Aside from the large services sector, it now has a mix of light industry, lumber mills, animal husbandry, and marijuana production. There was a large influx of former urbanite “Back to the Landers” in the 1970s that slowly changed the culture of the area. People are very creative around here, and local artists and artisans abound.

Before moving to Willits, I had been a highly mobile tropical biologist, but had become disillusioned by the failure of various institutions I worked with to initiate any long-lasting, fundamental changes. And given the reality of Peak Oil, I did wonder how long I could afford to have field sites on the other side of the globe. Having grown up in California, we were looking for a place that was close to our roots, had a small town character within a largely rural setting, and a culture that seemed ready to do something about Peak Oil, climate change, economic globalization, and related ills. Nowhere seemed perfect, but Willits had a lot going for it and my wife (an M.D.) got a job here.

We began settling into our 1903 home, made of Redwood and needing many repairs as well as efficiency upgrades. I started to make connections in the community. It was not difficult. The local coffee house was full of conversation. People were talking about books I had read, such as “The Party’s Over,” and how none of the Presidential candidates were proposing to deal with what really mattered. At the open house for the Willits Environmental Center (WEC) I saw a flyer about the “Big Rollover” written by Randy Udall about six years ago. SolFest in the nearby town of Hopland promoted the need for alternative energy and lifestyles (www.solarliving.org/solfest2004.cfm). I attended a Willits workshop on GROW BIOINTENSIVE farming by Ecology Action (www.growbiointensive.org). The whole staff as well as the handful of local participants knew about resource depletion and its effects on food production and distribution. Willits was a cultural milieu waiting to be stirred.

History of Willits Economic Localization (WELL), Oct., 2004-Mar., 2005

On Oct. 18th, I organized a showing of the film “End of Suburbia” at the WEC. About 20 people came, including the mayor, another city council member, and a local reporter. After the film we sat in a large circle and had a lengthy, rather open discussion.

The WEC has a large marquee that all the traffic on Main Street, which is synonymous with US Hwy 101, can see as they pass. Literally, thousands of cars and trucks pass this sign each day. A steady stream of messages about “Peak Oil,” “End of Suburbia” screenings, and “Sustainable Willits” meetings have been there for months now. Initially, I had also placed about 20 flyers on public bulletin boards around town. Before the first meeting, an article ran in the local paper titled “Bradford: Oil will ‘peak’ this decade.” Next came the headline, “Planning for the end of oil. Film and discussion of energy alternatives at the Willits library on Monday, November 8.” That event attracted about 60 people and overflowed the meeting room. It was similar in format to the first: (1) see film, (2) moderated discussion.

A buzz started going around town by now. It was front page news (“Life After Cheap Oil: Got a Blueprint?” www.energybulletin.net/3132.html). We’d had a packed house and lively discussion. Many of the local “movers and shakers” were engaged. So I really needed some sort of strategy to deal with this. I had never been involved in community organizing before and was brand new to this scene. But people started coming forward asking how they could help. I had to find some way to get this away from me as a focal point and turn it into a process that the public owned.

The next meeting, Nov. 23 at the Willits high-school cafeteria, was an attempt to do that. A crowd of ca. 90 showed up, and was divided roughly in half between those who wanted to watch the movie and those wanting to start “doing something.” I had come up with the idea of breaking into “Study Groups” where people would organize around their interests. Before just leaping to “Action,” I wanted folks to get a sense of where we are now versus where we are possibly headed. This would ground us in reality and establish a “frame” within which we could envision a transition. I solicited proposals for these groups and the obvious ones came up: Food, Water, Energy, Shelter, Transportation, Security, Local Currency, Education, Politics and Governance, Community Farm and Ecovillage, Funding, etc. But we never actually divided up during that meeting. People still needed to voice their general concerns and ideas. It was a two and a half hour chat session that was very cathartic but not terribly productive. The crowd was obviously diverse and it was becoming hard to know how to keep them together. Some were far into the process of absorbing the information, others were brand new and couldn’t relate to the enormity of it all. I really needed a smart strategy to manage this.

Fortunately, others understood my needs and stepped forward. I started meeting with people between events to help strategize and plan. We arranged a great space at the Willits Charter School, which was pleased by what we were doing. From early on, I had told the group that we needed to move through phases of awareness, planning and then action, although they would always blend into each other. The next news article reflected our shift (“Sustainability Planning Underway” www.energybulletin.net/3655.html).

Another publicity boon came through a new local radio show called “The Party’s Over” that aired every other Monday from 9 to 10 am (www.kzyx.org). Richard Heinberg was the second guest (www.globalpublicmedia.com/interviews/269), and I was the third (www.globalpublicmedia.com/articles/330) on the program. I was clearly among a well-

informed general public that had a strong sense of place and a feeling of local empowerment. Not long before I had arrived, Mendocino County had become the first in the nation to ban Genetically Modified Organisms. This was a huge rallying point, and my goal was to create another movement. The daunting fact was that we couldn't rest after an election, we had to shift the culture permanently: we needed a local social movement with staying power.

We formed a Steering Committee of about 20 people that meets every other Monday between the regularly scheduled large gatherings. We combine pot-luck meals with strategic planning and the nitty-gritty of making sure the next event runs smoothly. A well-established, local non-profit (www.redinet.org) two blocks from my home is now our legal umbrella group. So we have a great office and a way to manage donations and obtain grants. Another local nonprofit has provided us with Web Services. We are using a "wiki" to allow people to create the web site based on our work (www.cloudforest.org/Willits_Economic_Localization). The WEC provides us with liability insurance for our meetings. A city council member has arranged for us to meet in the Community Center and Council Chambers at no charge. A coalition of like-minded community organizations has allowed this to happen.

The Steering Committee has adopted our means of governance. We have an 80% consensus rule for debate and resolution, and we form rules on an *ad hoc* basis. We have had to decide what to name ourselves and how to approve the use of funds. We work to form the upcoming schedule of events and how we are going to structure the meetings, what our priorities and strategies will be, etc.

Recently we have hosted a series of guest speakers: Richard Heinberg, Ann Hancock, John Jeavons and Gloria & Steve Decater. This has been a great break from the regular meetings, and the speakers have been motivating. More people show up for a speaker (over 100 each time) than a big meeting (ca. 60) so this helps enrollment. Also, it has allowed the core participants in the study groups enough time to clarify their purpose and determine how to manage the public meetings. It appears that people are starting to do much of the work as self-organized groups and come together at the public meetings for enrollment, networking and getting new ideas. We may alternate between guest speakers and public meetings.

The town is beginning to change because of WELL. The city council uses the WELL Energy Group to study options for local energy infrastructure. Several community groups are using the WELL Food Group as an advisory board for new community gardens. The foundation in charge of developing a new hospital has assembled a "Green Team" of WELL participants from the Health & Medicine Group, the Shelter Group, the Energy Group, and the Food Group to advise on design, construction and operation methods. WELL participants are drafting alternative plans for 61 new houses and asking the developer and the city council to adopt them.

The story of Willits is encouraging others within the county to organize. Similar groups are attempting to form in Potter Valley, Redwood Valley, Ukiah, Anderson Valley,

Laytonville, Covello, Gualala and Caspar. They look to WELL for guidance. Thus, I hope the following helps my neighboring communities and similar ventures around the world.

My Perspectives and Tips for Organizers

This began as a bunch of unorganized, but enthusiastic and concerned individuals. A few of us provided some structure, such as setting an agenda, laying out a long-term strategy, and enrolling meeting facilitators. The various groups within WELL have mimicked the overall structure. It is important to appreciate the organic and unpredictable nature of such a movement. We are constantly questioning our methods and anticipating needs. The key to long-term success will be enrolling new people without tiring out the core, and demonstrating concrete actions based on all the discussions to date.

The more cynical in the community may not believe that a grassroots movement like this can hang together long enough to reach critical mass. We will need some concrete proof of our effectiveness before many others will step forward. Of the curious who arrive, some are unaware of Peak Oil and encounter folks way ahead of them conceptually and psychologically. The shock can be too great and they retreat. The committed have different views on the implications of Peak Oil, including a rough technocratic transition, social breakdown, and a new age renaissance. We are searching for ways to encourage people at different stages of awareness and with different views on what the future holds to work together, or at least not interfere with each other.

Solving these problems of enrollment, momentum, and group cohesion involves proper orientation of newcomers, a well-articulated set of values that is broadly accepted, and a logical set of actions that align behavior with those values. These elements are emerging.

Our shared values encompass a yin-yang spectrum that crosses political, ethnic, gender, and generational lines: Responsibility, Ingenuity, Security and Community (RISC). It is good to have agreement on these values so that people are reminded of what they share during times of conflict, which always emerge in groups. When groups resolve conflict successfully they emerge stronger.

For orientation, we currently take people to a separate room and give them an overview of WELL. We have designed and put to good use a beautiful set of visuals (Appendix). Then our newcomers see "The End of Suburbia." Afterwards we ask them to share their thoughts about how this impacts them and the community of Willits. We have a flyer posted around town and handed out at meetings that articulates what WELL is, why it formed, and what we are doing (Appendix). This helps people see that there are many people who know what the problems are and are intelligently working on the solutions. It is a wonderful, hopeful, way to come out of the film.

Marketers know that people need to be bombarded by a single, clear message many times before they internalize it. In our meetings, we reinforce the same themes. An organizer needs to repeat over and over again in logical, simple language the purpose of the group,

what they are doing, and why they are doing it. We strive to be intelligent and folksy at the same time. We have a script and practice it until it is just a natural set of phrases.

The various groups examining issues of energy, food, water, etc., exist at different levels of participation and progress towards the strategic stages we have laid out: Inventory, Envisioning, Planning and Action (Appendix). Some groups are more linear and disciplined and are working through these stages in order. Others have a more concurrent process. It is difficult to say which is more effective. Whatever allows people to stay engaged should be fine, as long as they stick to the vision of localization and foster the core values. However, it is clear that effective group facilitation is essential. Groups that have stuck with a single, committed, organized facilitator have done very well. Those lacking leadership or wanting to share it too much have ended up with meetings of variable quality, which discourages participation. Strategies to rescue foundering groups include infusion of group clarity and order by a core set of participants, and inclusion of a weak group within a related strong group. For example, our Shelter Group could conceivably join with the Energy Group and frame its actions in terms of energy conservation via retrofitting, and design principles for new construction.

We have taken a while to feel comfortable and confident with this process and format. The meetings are getting shorter and staying closer to the agenda, which people like. There are many mistakes we have made along the way, but people seem to appreciate how responsive we are to feedback. The Steering Committee has representatives from each Study Group and this is how we (meaning the core group of organizers) discover how people feel, what suggestions they have, etc. It is analogous to the breathing process. The core organizers give suggestions to the community at a large meeting, we get feedback through the Steering Committee, we internalize this and adjust, and then we put it back out again at the next event.

It really helps to clarify why we are using a particular process or methodology because otherwise individuals may feel they are wasting their time, and thus dampen group enthusiasm. In a nutshell, we are using a community research model. This works by grounding people in the reality of the current system; i.e., taking the Inventory, as a first step towards building relationships among themselves and the broader community. Tackling questions about the present should be easier and much less controversial than questions about the future. We build confidence and trust before doing the hard parts. By the time we get to the Visioning, Planning and Action stages we have developed skills, information and relationships that will empower us to do something as bold as changing the local culture. This doesn't mean we don't have an initial, broad vision established early on, such as creating a sustainable, local economy and a life promoting culture. It just means that we pause before leaping to action to sort out what we have to work with, and make ourselves stronger in the process. Our culture lacks a strategic vision beyond making a quick buck and always striving to "do something." Our knee-jerk reactions often mirror those faulty characteristics.

This model has been only moderately successful. For example, many people accepted responsibility for research but had a hard time with it. This is understandable. More

recently, we have empowered anyone who likes doing research to take it on wherever it is needed. It is probably best not to pressure anyone to share in the research responsibility as this may just alienate a good segment of the participants.

The folks coming to these meetings are smart and motivated. They have their own ideas, and they are ready to tell us what they think! While we can't cater to everyone's whim, we often can find ways to accommodate logical desires or predilections. We noticed, for example, that there were some with relevant projects who were so single-minded that they were disruptive. So instead of fighting this, we gave them an outlet. Beginning each meeting we ask people to stand up and announce what they are doing and what sort of participation from this group they are seeking. A bulletin board is used to post any flyers people bring. We are building social capital and improving our skills through classes on gardening, herbal medicine, natural building, etc.

When I began talking to the community about the scale of our problems, I pulled very few punches. Amazingly, people kept coming back; but I wrongly assumed this was because they understood what I was saying. I see now that my sentences were too long, my terminology unfamiliar, and so many felt overwhelmed. I probably lost a few along the way. As it turns out, however, many stuck around because they are aware of a pervasive "sickness" and want to find an alternative community of people to make systemic change. They cringe at fear-based reactions and long for a positive vision. Another sizeable percentage is aware of Peak Oil and overshoot and fear for their food supply. They often talk about "security" concerns. Both these groups need to be validated; and I find people from these different perspectives are learning from each other. We share a common set of values and goals and that is what matters.

To those stuck in fear and anger, WELL gives them a social outlet that may enable resolution. If they go through this grieving process they will be psychologically better off. To those stuck in some form of denial (or inability to acknowledge fear), the success of WELL makes it safer for them to face unpleasant information and ideas. Those with more positive attitudes help the gloomy lighten up and enjoy the present.

The demographics of WELL can be described as "predominantly empty-nesters with a progressive liberal bent." However, we do have two prominent local Republican community leaders involved. Outreach to a broad segment of the community is essential and we have a Media/Outreach group to help us hone and market messages. Guest speakers attract more diverse audiences and I believe once we start having visible projects many more will participate. I am giving a presentation to the local Rotary Club. The Media Group leader is enrolling high school students to help with surveys and videography projects.

WELL is not about traditional activism, which identifies a foe and seeks to resolve an injustice. WELL places a mirror in front of everyone and asks people to reflect upon their lives. The horror! Look what we are doing to the planet, to our children, to ourselves, to our neighbors! We need redemption. Start with individuals, form groups, link groups to

form new communities. Walk the talk. Be confident but humble because redeemers shouldn't boast.

Many of the global injustices activists rally against are required to maintain the lifestyles we enjoy. When the big, bad world gets you riled up, turn to your neighborhood and make changes there first. We must be willing to change our own expectations and behaviors, thinking long-term about the emerging systemic effects. However, people often face awful personal constraints regarding where and how they live. If you recognize their hypocrisy, don't get too preachy. And above all, give them time to sort out these inconsistencies.

If you are motivated to start an Outpost, I recommend you first do a self-assessment. Make sure you are beyond any panic or depression stage from learning about Peak Oil. Only after going through the various stages of grief and coming to a place of acceptance will you be strong enough to take on a leadership role. Once you have realized that you are not in control will you be able to lead. People will sense that what you are doing is not primarily about your own ego or salvation. The sincerity you convey will build immediate empathy and trust. Be willing to share your own feelings in order to allow others comfort with theirs.

You will be overwhelmed by the organizing process and suffer founder's crisis unless you can delegate and relinquish control. If someone comes to you with a good idea, tell him or her how great it is and then ask if they can take care of it or find somebody who can. *Your job is to create a large cadre of community leaders who will carry through with plans to change our economy and culture in a sensible way.*

Sort out your strengths and weaknesses. Personally, I am a "big picture" person steeped in the facts and theories. I have never run a small business, created a marketing campaign, or run a strategic planning workshop. The only reason this group has done so well is because others with complementary skills have filled niches that I leave empty. If you are starting a new group, it is wise to have partners and to discuss the roles you will have before initiating public meetings.

You will be disappointed many times along the way. People will fail to follow through on their word. People will be slow to comprehend what you are intimately familiar with. Folks will come and go. Have nearly infinite patience, but be there to step in and get something done if it really needs doing. Forgive yourself when you blunder.

Most of all, enjoy creating a new way of life and a new community of caring, responsible people. Embrace the wonderful moments you have now and recognize that you can only be expected to change yourself and your community, and just hope the world follows.

Acknowledgements

In this paper, I am speaking about WELL from my own perspective, not for WELL. However, there are dozens of people I've become very fond of and who's wisdom I've

tapped into. If they read this I hope they will see a bit of themselves in what I've expressed and know how much I have learned from them. Thank's to all of you. I feel at home in Willits.