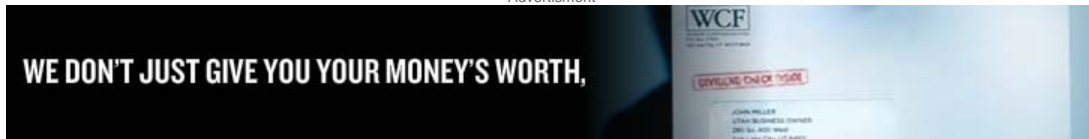


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Polishing a Diamond in the Rough

The revitalization of Ogden is a lesson for every municipality in America.

by Wina Sturgeon

In little more than a decade, this formerly shabby low-rent city has been transformed into a top tourist destination, a host for world-class athletic events and a still-growing relocation center for international companies that make gear, apparel and accessories for skiers and snowboarders.

Ogden's rebirth exploded after the 2002 Winter Olympics held in Salt Lake City, but that renaissance had been simmering for a long time. Still, the transformation needed a catalyst to begin taking shape.

The catalyst came via the vision of two men: Mayor Matthew Godfrey, who was first elected in 1999 when he was 29 years old; and Curt Geiger, vice

president of Descente North America.

"When I first became mayor, Ogden's reputation and appearance was dire in all regards. I didn't have the vision then, just pieces of it. It has been an evolving story," says Godfrey.

It was Geiger who filled in the blanks. He told Godfrey, "Look, you're 25 minutes from Snowbasin and Powder Mountain, two spectacular and upcoming resorts. You're 35 minutes from an international airport. The city has all these historic brick warehouses that we can fix up. Why not focus on a particular industry to bring here?"

It was decided to make Ogden the Silicon Valley of the Intermountain West. Godfrey says with a laugh, "We knew that around the country, the high-tech sector were the urban pioneers. So for the first three and a half years, we focused on bringing tech companies downtown, with zero success. The downtown area got fixed up and redeveloped — about 20 acres of it — but we didn't bring in one tech job in that time."

Meanwhile, Ogden had been provided with the resources needed for transformation. The Olympics are a gold mine for a host city and surrounding areas, which are showered with money by the International Olympic Committee and the United States Olympic Committee.

The Games are like a form of municipal welfare. Most cities build new roads and new buildings. They expand. But Ogden used its Olympic money to refurbish the infrastructure and the historic downtown area and improve existing roads.

In 2004, Descente moved its North American headquarters to Ogden. The two began networking to create the new city. Geiger introduced the mayor to important players in the ski and snowboard industry.

"It wasn't glamorous work. When I'd hear that a company was thinking of moving, I'd approach them about moving here and tell them what we could offer them. From then to now, we've recruited probably 20 different brands to Ogden," says Godfrey.

The selling point had little to do with revenue. The core of the mayor's original vision was the unique closeness of the historic downtown area to an unlimited variety of adventurous outdoor recreation. Northern Utah, the "top" of the angular state, was undiscovered; open and wild, filled with fruit orchards and farms. The pristine beauty and undeveloped land in that part of the state was enticing.

Geiger remembers, "Our message became 'Ogden is the best place to work and play in the ski industry.' We didn't just focus on the ski town as being about great snow, but a great place to work and live, rather than just a place to vacation. It just made sense. Why should (a company) be in an industrial park more than two hours away from the mountains, when they can have their offices in such a beautiful place just 25 minutes from world-class skiing and snowboarding?"

And then there was GOAL. The Greater Ogden Athletic Legacy took shape during the last days of the 2002 Olympics among the involved and enthusiastic local Olympic volunteers. "It happened because, like so many other host cities when the Olympics are over, all that energy and spirit needed a place to go. Our mission originally was to keep alive the spirit of the Olympic Games," says Greg Scothern, the elected president of the GOAL Foundation, which since changed to mean "Get Out And Live."

GOAL has more than 700 trained and experienced volunteers who can help with any sporting event. As everyone knows, if you build it, they will come. The reliable database of free helpers exists nowhere else. It was one of the factors that attracted elite events like the Xterra World Championships, held summer and winter at Snowbasin.

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"The events we create, like the Ogden Marathon, which GOAL owns, is a major economic engine for tourism, hotels and restaurants," says Scothern. "This year, we have close to 7,000 people participating in the marathon, and about two-thirds of them will need food and lodging. During the marathon, the hotels are sold out and the restaurants are full."

But not everyone is happy with all the new businesses, events and changes.

Dan Schroeder, conservation chair of the Ogden Sierra Club, says of Mayor Godfrey, "It's safe to say we're not getting along. He's not speaking to us." The Sierra Club feels that Godfrey is trying to develop too much open space and is too anxious to bring new businesses to Ogden; too willing to give away too much to get them. Godfrey's controversial idea to build a gondola on Ogden's East Bench that will connect to a yet-to-be-built ski resort further up the mountain has infuriated conservationists because it will force the development of a lot of open space.

"We believe that these lands are much more valuable in their current condition, where they already offer tremendous recreational opportunities. There are so many other areas in Ogden that can be developed without touching our open space," Schroeder says.

The divisive gondola issue has yet to be decided.

Meanwhile, the increased tax base from new businesses relocating to Ogden has allowed the mayor to lower property taxes four times over the past decade. Yet the strain between Godfrey and the Sierra Club points out an obvious conflict for the mayor: When a recruited company wants a new site for its headquarters or a new luxury hotel wants a scenic location, will their relocation be allowed to eat up the recreational open space? Is there a conflict for Godfrey between his beloved high-adventure terrain and the space needed for new commerce?

"Not too often," says Godfrey. "Most of the development is happening in places already zoned for it. What we're doing is redevelopment. I don't feel that commerce is infringing on open space. I understand that conflict could occur in the future, but there has to be a balance. There has to be a rational and measured approach in it."

An example of the redevelopment mentality is the Amer Building. Amer Sports is the parent company of the Atomic, Suunto, Solomon and Bonfire Apparel brands, to name a few.

"It was an old cannery. It was a historical building. Amer had it restored, and now it's a spectacular building that Boston would be proud to have in the center of their city. Descente saved the old Eccles family steer foundry building and turned it into the American distribution center for Descente. It's a beautiful restoration job," says Geiger. Godfrey reports that Ogden has been ranked by Outside magazine as the second-best outdoor town in America. "I couldn't have envisioned this back in 2001. Five years ago, we weren't on anybody's radar," he says.

The most ironic part of Ogden's renewal is that the city is now being approached by tech companies interested in relocating there.

Godfrey laughs, "With our new image, the worker demographic that they wish to hire finds Ogden the perfect community for their lifestyle."

A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats

Ogden's success radiates to the surrounding communities.

It's almost a secret: the Northwestern Band of the Shoshone Nation is located in Brigham City. This is the tribe whose famous princess, Sacagawea, helped guide the Lewis and Clark expedition. The tribe is a successful business entity, partially because as soon as companies in Northern Utah became successful, they would move elsewhere, according to Michael Devine, chief operating officer of the tribe's Economic Development Corporation.

"That left us with a surplus of highly educated, hard-working, talented professionals. So because we had people in the tribe who had been doing federal contracting, we said, 'Let's get the tribe doing this as a tribe.' We've worked closely with the Governor's Office of Economic Development, they've introduced us to federal agencies and people who can help us. Based on this great tribal/state government partnership, we've been able to make inroads on large government contracts," Devine says.

It's true that a rising tide lifts all boats. The "boats" around Ogden — like Brigham City and Box Elder County — are all seeing an increase in commerce and revenue. Jason Perry, the executive director of the Governor's Office of Economic Development, says that Northern Utah is just being discovered.

"There's been a total increase in interest, activity and deals since the Olympics. It seems like the local government and business leaders have come together to promote that part of the state and its opportunities. We have a young and well-educated workforce. That's how you land a huge company like Procter & Gamble, which was one of the biggest economic development deals in the history of the state," Perry says of the corporation that brought 1,200 jobs to the top of Utah.

Utah's export business rose 38 percent in 2008, and Northern Utah was a large part of that. Hershey's is bringing a manufacturing and distribution site to Ogden. Few people are aware that one of the world's most popular websites, Toptenreviews.com, a Consumer Reports for tech gear, is also in Ogden. The success of the Ogden hub is radiating out to all of its surrounding communities.

Perry knows why companies are coming in droves to the area. "They love the location and the regulatory environment. The local governments are very business-friendly and try to make things happen. So does the business community. The cost of doing business in Northern Utah is also lower than in most other places," he says.

But the growth in commerce is not just from corporate growth. Devine explains about one lucrative and surprising project being completed by the Shoshone. "We are building a 500-megawatt geothermal plant in Honeyville, north of Brigham City. It will provide 50 percent of the power for the city of Riverside, in California. The power comes from the heated water underneath the water table. The head generates steam that turns a turbine to create the power. This will bring money into Honeyville and Box Elder County," he says.

Perry says that the economic success of the area is not an accident: "It's been a concerted effort by many groups of people to grow in smart ways. And it's beautiful there; the quality of life is high. You put all these things together in a world where you can do business anywhere you choose, and places like Northern Utah start to become very compelling."



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