

Editorial: Lang's gift can help area emulate Walla Walla's success

Umpqua Valley wine industry
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There is a rural community in the Pacific Northwest where the unemployment rate in January was higher than normal at 6.7 percent; where taxable retail sales rose during the period from 2000 to 2008 by 50 percent; where the nominal average wage grew from \$25,995 in the year 2000 to almost \$35,000 in 2008.

Sound good? There's more.

This same community saw its labor force grow by more than 20 percent during the last 10 years. The number of arts establishments grew rapidly. Direct tourism spending in the community rose from \$57 million in 2001 to more than \$91 million in 2008 — nearly 60 percent growth. Even the on-time high school graduation rates significantly improved.

With numbers like these it is little wonder that many community leaders are enthused about emulating the success Walla Walla, Wash., has found with its explosive growth in wines and tourism. That growth started with an academic program in enology and viticulture at the city's community college.

Last week, local attorney Danny Lang made the first large down payment on a better future for our community by donating \$800,000 to set dreams of the Southern Oregon Wine Institute at Umpqua Community College on the path to reality.

His contribution is an essential component of an ambitious \$8 million project that includes vineyards, a comprehensive teaching winery, wine laboratory, event center, commercial-scale winemaking facility, and wine incubator to help jump-start new wine entrepreneurs.

UCC Foundation President and former Roseburg Schools Superintendent Lee Paterson calls “SOWI a catalyst that accelerates the growth of an exciting industry capable of transforming the economic fortunes of communities throughout Southern Oregon.”

Those close to the project regularly point to the natural advantages Southern Oregon has that Walla Walla does not. Chief among them is our proximity to the Interstate 5 corridor and the spectacular beauty that already draws rave comments from tourists.

Not to mention climate, soils and water that make this a fabulous area for vineyards. The wine cluster in the Umpqua Valley is already rated among the top destination winery areas in the country and it has been quietly, but rapidly growing.

Many award-winning small wineries opened during the past decade. Major wineries have purchased, or seek to purchase, vineyard land in our valleys. There is activity as you read this.

UCC President Blaine Nisson, after visiting Walla Walla with local wine celebrity Scott Henry, has led the charge on this endeavor.

Vineyards at UCC were planted last year, the wine education program launched, architectural drawings developed, donors contacted and a broad outline of the future shared.

“Supporting the SOWI teaching, learning and event center capital campaign is much more than just supporting the construction of the building,” Nisson said. “It is about supporting the people of Southern Oregon and our economic future.”

Danny Lang put it a bit more personally. “I am very dedicated to education,” he said, “to improving the lot of people I see in my office every day.”

The growth of wineries and tourism appears to be our next, best opportunity toward resolving the cycles of poverty and unemployment that followed the loss of so many timber jobs. It is a real chance to re-make the economy of our area.

Our thanks to Danny Lang and the others whose contributions will make this a reality.