



February 22, 2023
For immediate release

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Growing Rural Oregon initiative welcomes new communities

Rural leaders in St. Helens and Tillamook will work to build local entrepreneurial ecosystems

Roseburg, Ore.: Local leaders in Tillamook County and St. Helens are joining a cohort of rural communities across the state who are committed to supporting strong entrepreneurial growth and “bottom up” economic development using the Growing Rural Oregon (GRO) framework.

With targeted coaching and funding for a local GRO Navigator for the next five years, the leadership teams in Tillamook and St. Helens will be equipped to identify growth and investment opportunities, leverage best practices and connect to new ideas, resources, and industry leaders. They will also have the benefit of learning from and networking with peer communities in GRO’s inaugural cohort: Grant County, Independence and Klamath Falls.

GRO recognizes that every rural community has entrepreneurial talent, but not every community has an entrepreneurial “ecosystem,” with the resources and supports necessary for rural entrepreneurs to establish and meet success. GRO’s [flexible framework](#) serves all kinds of communities – those who are brand new in their efforts to support entrepreneurship, those who have some systems in place and those who have done this work for a long time.

“We always meet communities where they are,” said Kathleen Flanagan, director of Community Economic Development at The Ford Family Foundation. “When you take a grassroots approach and focus on entrepreneurship, you build better diversified and more stable economies that are much more adaptive and prepared for change.”

Rapid change has been the experience of St. Helens, where post-COVID start-up and spin-off businesses are booming, both a new Small Business Development Center and an Oregon Main Street organization have launched, and the city has begun redevelopment of its business district and waterfront.

“The inclusion of St. Helens in the GRO initiative is a very fortunate convergence,” said Paul Vogel, executive director of the Columbia Economic Team. “In a rural county, when one community is strengthened and elevated, every community is strengthened and elevated.”

John Walsh, city administrator of St. Helens echoed these sentiments. “With this support, we can leverage local assets and grow local talent.”



In Tillamook County, communities support businesses from the new to the established, from large to small, from crafting to manufacturing, from forestry to fishing, from tourism to the arts, and from agriculture to technology.

“Tillamook County has a heart of entrepreneurship, which is beneficial to both our economy and our citizens,” said Nathan George, Tillamook city manager.

“Participating in the GRO program is a way to ensure that we honor the entrepreneurial spirit that made this county what it is and ‘pay-it-forward’ to all the future entrepreneurs who will benefit from this work,” added Terre Cooper, director of the Economic Development Council of Tillamook County.

The Tillamook County Economic Development Council and Tillamook Small Business Development Center will serve as core partners in the implementation of the GRO framework.

Partnership is critical to GRO’s success. GRO utilizes a framework developed in close collaboration with e2 Entrepreneurial Ecosystems, a leader in rural economic development with more than 30 years of experience in the field. The e2 framework has been used in the field for nearly two decades by NetWork Kansas and dozens of other communities across the U.S. The initiative is housed within Oregon’s Economic Development Districts and managed by Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council (COIC).

To learn more about Growing Rural Oregon, its partners and the communities involved, please visit www.growingruraloregon.org.

About The Ford Family Foundation

The Ford Family Foundation believes in the power of rural communities. It is a private, nonprofit foundation proudly headquartered in Roseburg, Oregon, serving rural Oregon and Siskiyou County, California. Its investments through grants, scholarships and community building create the conditions so that children have the family, educational and community supports they need to succeed in life. www.tfff.org

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