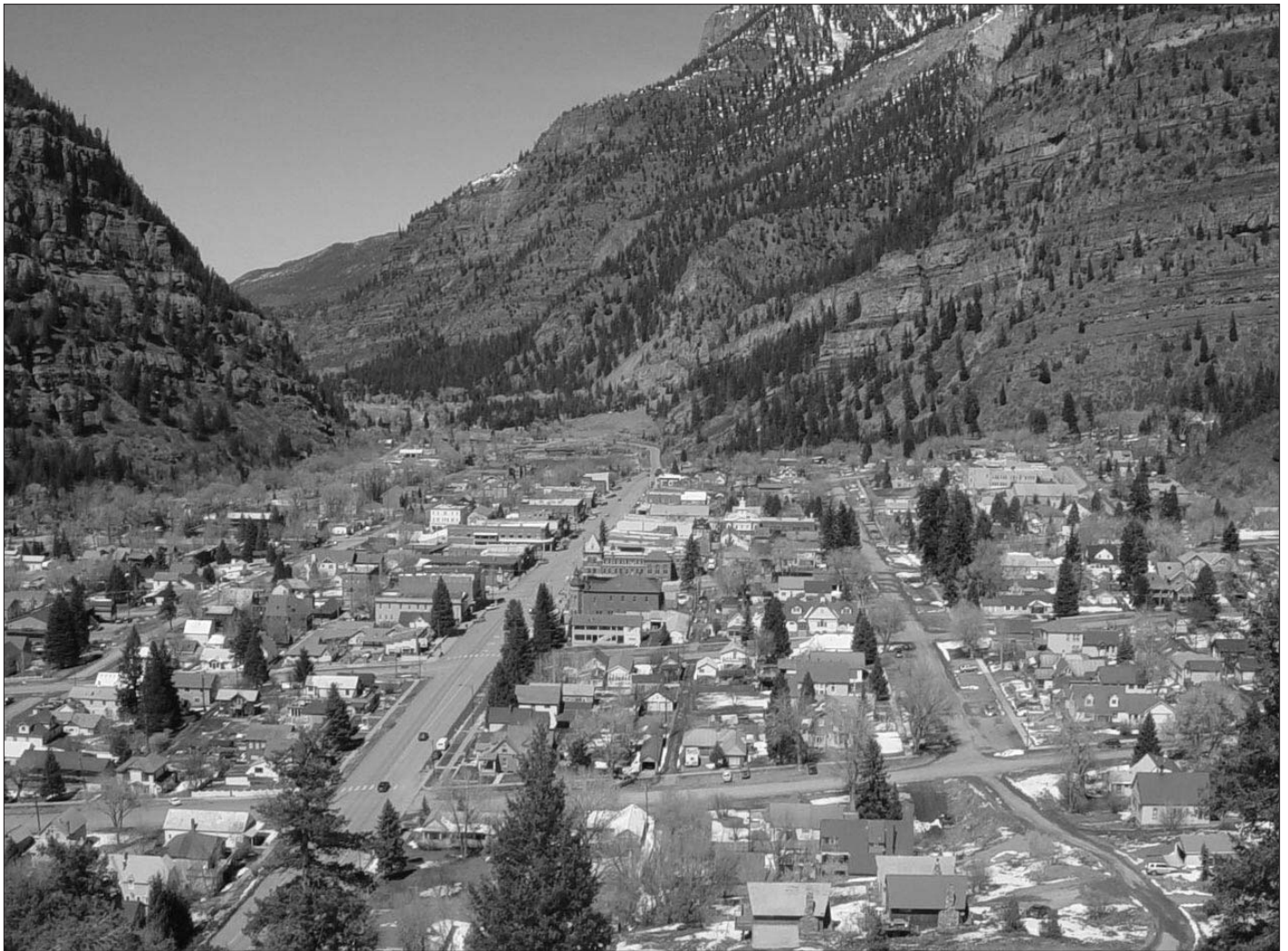


# CommUNITY builds all-for-one attitude



## Ouray pulls together to put town on track

*By Joyce Linn, CommUnity group codirector*

**I**t seems to have started with the fires of 2002. Although no wild-fires burned near Ouray, residents and visitors could smell the smoke drifting across the valley from fires elsewhere. And, the gen-

eral perception of a hot and dry and dangerous Colorado created a flood of lodging cancellations. After a very good start, suddenly the summer tourism tanked.

Ouray is a tiny mountain village (800 people) nestled into arguably the most beautiful valley in Col-

orado (or in the world, we think) in the San Juans between Telluride and Silverton. Like much of southwestern Colorado, especially the mountain towns originated by mining, tourism is the economic engine. Although some winter tourism is being developed, summer is the major business season. When the summer tourism declines, the impact is immediate and affects all segments of the community through lack of revenue to support businesses, residents and city services. This extreme and unexpected decline set nerves on edge and sprouted an uncustomary blame game, changing the usual collegiality among merchants, residents and government – and illuminating an undercurrent of divisions among various sectors of the community.

CommUNITY came from this situation, formed to ask those various sectors to examine the future of Ouray and, within that framework, to find a reason to work together.

One business group had been investigating the processes involved in Main Street USA, hoping to find the resources to adopt that program (unlikely), but much of their format was used to design the structure of CommUNITY. Further, some models of Leadership Training Programs seen in other communities were adapted to better acquaint all with the broader scope of the fabric of Ouray and the synergy it might provide, and perhaps develop an expanded desire among participants to assume leadership roles in the community.

After several initial brainstorming sessions about problems and conflicts, and about Ouray's potential, a winter series of "CommUnity Forums" was planned, involving 12 weekly, hourlong presentations by and discussions with various components of the town.

## Background

Because of the natural environment, Ouray's active lifestyle attracts an energetic population of both young families and young retirees. A significant number of second residences exist and the summer population approximately doubles the official population number. Recreational opportunities provide much of the "entertainment" and are a growing base of business



*Set in a bowl surrounded by steep mountains, Ouray has a finite area of land available for residential and business development. City Hall is pictured above. Photos by Michael Penny, Ouray manager.*

activity. The artist population is increasing and galleries are a growing base of business activity.

Set in a bowl surrounded by steep mountains, Ouray has a fixed area of land available for residential and business development. The town has about 10 streets going each direction. Growth has an obvious and finite capacity, and stress on that capacity is inevitable.

There is a relatively low political involvement among the general pop-

ulation, countywide. Because of low taxation (Ouray County has the second-lowest tax structure in Colorado), nonprofit organizations carry a disproportionate load in funding and providing services, events and improvements – and they create much of the social network. In the county of 3,800, there are 75 nonprofit organizations!

The business community consists almost entirely of owner-managed small businesses, leaving little time or energy for participation in chamber like volunteer activities or leadership, or general socializing with the rest of the community. Many who do their entire business in summer, leave during the winter.

The school is small and maintains an excellent academic rating with considerable attention given to providing exposure to a broader world than might be expected considering the isolation of the community. Most graduates continue to college.

With a weekly newspaper and no other communication vehicles, it is difficult to circulate information within Ouray. However, during this past year the school began a radio station (the only student-run radio station in the country) and they are providing twice hourly community announcements. This should help as residents learn to tune in. Otherwise, general communication is a challenge.

It is important to note that CommUNITY has no budget, no officers, no membership, no constitution or formal organization. Two persons were asked informally by the mayor to consider how the community might work together more cohesively and might consider the future. One is an artist active in the business community, with her own studio and shop. One is a resident active in local organizations.

Occasionally solicitations are made of participants to cover

particular expenses. Additionally, the City Council helped advertise the CommUNITY Forums on a one-time basis, and Ouray Chamber Resort Association helped advertise the “Shop Local” campaign. The city provides meeting space and occasional copying. The city administrator typically attends all meetings and provides the coordinators cogent leadership in planning.

### CommUnity forums

These winterlong meetings were designed to learn more about a variety of community components – organizations and governmental bodies. Their representatives were asked to discuss current activities, missions and goals, and how they see their organization five to 10 years from now. Several included on-site tours. Organizations and issues covered include:

- Ouray County Historical Society/ Museum

## Some working groups emerged from the winter of brainstorming and community education.

- Artists Association
- Schools
- School support organizations
- Ouray Library – on-site tour
- Hot springs pool
- Ouray Community Center – on-site tour
- Parks and recreation – included tour of new park and trail
- Ouray City government
- Ouray County government
- Ouray Chamber Resort Association

- Business Merchants Association
- Ridgway Chamber
- Region 10
- Health care
- Real estate trends

### Committees

Some working groups emerged from the winter of brainstorming and community education. The end of the forum process coincided with the seasonal resurgence of intense activity, conflicting with time and energy available for such pursuits.

However, as the winter meetings progressed, working groups were taking shape and, surprisingly, some initial results can be reported – with hope that interest will be sustained to continue and enhance such activity in absence of a crisis. A good platform has been developed to use this next winter to advantage for planning for the future.

**Communication** – enhance the experience for visitors and locals by

sharing information among organizations and getting it to the public.

Results:

A community Web site

Block captains in the business sector distributing information about events, etc.

Regular and frequent e-mail updates to chamber members regarding immediate events

Proposed information kiosk in the center of town

Merchant directory: notebooks located around town with pages on what merchants have available.

**Spring training seminar** – designed to inform summer seasonal employees of the unique aspects Ouray offers its visitors.

Results:

New summer employees received orientation in information they need to appropriately help visitors find attractions, rest rooms, trails, etc. First impressions are that we will need to run this yearly and expand the session.

Several “attractions” invited employers to send their employees to “see inside” enabling them converse more knowledgeably, and several employers did so. That needs to be expanded also. Also, several new business owners attended and reported it of great benefit. Future planning should consider orientation and a “mentoring” program for new owners to help them more comfortably integrate into the business community – for their own success and the success of fellow businesses and attractions.

**Economic stability** – to assess the current economic base (tourism and real estate) and consider ways to broaden it.

Results:

Committee members are meeting regularly to assess the present and potential economic composition, attending seminars, examining resources available to provide pro-

fessional guidance, financing tools, etc. This is a “task force” type, short-term committee attempting to become familiar with the issue before making recommendations.

**Community enhancement** – planned to take action on topics such as a “shop local” campaign and to capitalize on local resources.

Results:

A campaign directed at local residents ran for several weeks in the local newspaper and on the Web site detailing the value to the larger community to spend as many dollars as possible in local stores.

**Preservation and architectural guidelines** – to consider voluntary guidelines to protect the Victorian style dominating our architecture and providing an important aspect of our identity.

Results:

Several members of the Ouray County Historical Society and the city staffers have examined



practices in other mountain towns and are in the discussion phase of how to proceed.

**Liaison** – to work with other organizations within the region and state “to look at the bigger picture” in which we operate.

Results:

As with several projects, this will be more suitably addressed after the intensity of “summer in Ouray.” Initial informal contacts have begun to gauge the best way to organize this

within our county and with our neighboring counties. Region 10 is also taking a lead in providing more beneficial interaction within our six counties pertinent to shared opportunities and challenges.

**Volunteer pool** – to systemize identification and use of volunteers to assist with the many events and services provided by local organizations, and to more quickly “induct” new residents into local activities.

Results:

This is totally on hold until the summer is done. A major project for 2003-2004.

**Event promotion** – to assist OCRA (Ouray Chamber Resort Assoc.) and other nonprofit organization promote events.

Results:

This is scheduled as a major activity during the winter, to brainstorm and plan for Summer 2004. The dynamics of the community do not reasonably allow sustained attention to such things during the summer, but long winter thinking time, planning and organizing should work well.

## Other results

Several things happened without specific group direction. In one brainstorming session, someone said, “We have a beautiful park with a gazebo, could we have concerts in the park?” One of the participants is a co-chairperson of the Ouray Performing Arts Guild. She quietly took that suggestion to her board and through the winter, they worked on such a plan and announced it this spring. This summer we have had monthly Free Sunday Evening Concerts in the Park. About 250 attend, bring picnic dinners and lawn chairs or blankets and totally enjoy this special sense of community. OPAG board members are pleased with the results and are considering this as a permanent activity, perhaps expand-

ing it next year to weekly concerts.

Another participant added an artists' component to the concerts, Artists in the Park, organizing local artists to set up easels, paint during that afternoon, and display their other paintings. Those visiting the park watch them paint and enjoy seeing their other finished works.

Another point mentioned in a brainstorming session was that our single adults, mostly newcomers and professionals, are having a hard time finding their social niche. A participant organized a Singles Group intended to capitalize on the reasons they found their way here, mostly outdoor activities, and hopes it will also develop into volunteer groups to meet needs within Ouray.

A Sense of Community: A considerable number of individuals have mentioned to the coordinators that participation in this group on a weekly basis helped them feel they

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were a part of the community for the first time, that it was the first vehicle to cause them to productively interact with their counterparts.

**Conclusion**

Probably due to a variety of reasons, CommUNITY seems to have become a recognized part of Ouray.

Among some, the timing and the environment of its creation led to suspicion that this organization was designed as a detriment or challenge to other organizations. This sense is lessening, but there are still some voids in consent and participation. The coordinators and participants have worked hard to be seen as a catalyst for new or different activity, a support for existing organizations, and a forum to comfortably express or explore new ideas. It was important that key leaders in critical organizations and businesses, the newspaper, and government leaders stuck with the group as it formed a plan and proceeded to a workable agenda. The direction and confidence of those community leaders has helped create an entity that seems to be working well...and is drawing attention from others as a model potentially suitable for their communities. ■