

Brookings, Oregon

by Georgia Nowlin, Resident



Head southwest from Portland, out to the coastal hinterlands of Oregon, and nestled in the southernmost corner of the Oregon/California border is Brookings. Located on "America's Wild Rivers Coast," to quote the local Chamber of Commerce, "it offers an incomparable quality of life...a place where wild and scenic rivers flow through towering forests...a quiet waterfront town overlooking majestic ocean vistas."

It is also the largest community in the small county of Curry, which includes Harbor and other unincorporated areas and has a population of about 14,000. The city of Brookings itself has about 5,700. Brookings and Harbor sit at the mouth of the Chetco River, which flows from the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and is part

of Siskiyou National Forest and the Klamath Mountains.

Before the first miners came to pan gold from the local streams and rivers, the earliest known inhabitants of the area were the Chetco Indians, an Athabaskan-speaking native people who lived in wooden plank houses. After the Rogue River Indian war of 1856, they were moved north to the Siletz Reservation. Lucy Dick,

the last of the area Chetcos, died in 1940 and is buried in the Old Pioneer Cemetery in Harbor.

A former mill town named for the owner of what was the Brookings Land and Townsite Company; it is considered one of Oregon's safest marine harbors. It is situated on a portion of the coast that runs east-west and is uniquely placed in a stream wind that compresses as it spills off the Klamath Mountains—this warms the air and contributes to the unusually balmy winter weather and warm rivers, known as the Brookings Effect, which has made Brookings so attractive to so many.

Like many other towns up and down the Oregon/Northern California coast, Brookings thrived during the glory years of fishing and logging, but when those two industries declined, so did the community. Brookings's transition from a logging and fishing economy to tourism has been a mixed success. Today, with the recent influx of people mostly from California, Brookings is experiencing a building boom.

In the past two years, this rural community has experienced growing pains due to the rapid increase in population and the accompanying rise of real estate prices. The frenzy of new construction, along with the planning processes for such projects as Borax's Lone Ranch development and the

various developments planned for the Harbor Hills, have stretched the limited resources of cash-strapped city and county departments attempting to cope with large-scale development. Impacts on water, storm water runoff, and sewer have also been concerns.

▶The shortage of funds for the city or county will not soon go away. Curry County, as are nearby counties, is dependent on what are known as O&C dollars. These dollars were originally portions of timber sales from Oregon & California Railroad land that was reverted—taken back—from the railroad by the Bureau of Land Management. Timber-sale payments dwindled in the 1990s, in part because these lands came under the authority of the Northwest Forest Plan and the Endangered Species Act.

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Timber-sale revenues were replaced with "safety net" payments from the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act passed in 2000. This act is set to expire in 2006 and many would like to see it extended.

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Top Topics for Brookings to Discuss:

- Stable funding for the county/city
- Development standards
- Water
- Health care
- Jobs

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have also been banned in the city. As of this writing, the school district and its employees' union still have not agreed on a new contract, after a year of working without one. There has also been heated public debate in the past year about the coupleting of Brookings's main street, Chetco Avenue, which is also Highway 101. The two proposals will be put to a citizen vote in September.

Yet Brookings is still a welcoming town, and people wave as you drive down a neighborhood street. May the wave continue to be a friendly gesture.

Georgia Nowlin: Southern California transplants some 12 years ago. My husband and I make legal moonshine in the coastal hills of Brookings. We own Brandy Peak Distillery, a microdistillery for brandies and blackberry liqueur. Our two children, one now in college and the other just graduated, have been through Brookings's educational system. I have been very involved with the schools over the years, and will still serve on the District's budget committee and as an ASPIRE volunteer in the coming year. I am also the Voter Service chairperson for the League of Women Voters of Curry County and sit on the advisory committee for Southwestern Community College.



While Brookings's great natural beauty and abundant resources have always attracted people, the problem has always been, and still is, a lack of jobs. Consequently, a large percentage of the population growth is retirees and others not dependent on wages. About 60 percent of the income in Curry County comes from dividends and transfer payments, largely Social Security and investments. This is also in a town where 60 percent of elementary school children are enrolled in free or reduced lunch programs.

The growing income disparity in the community, combined with the many new residents and different world views, is changing the nature of Brookings, its concerns, and public discourse. Attitudes, accepted practices, behaviors and mores of the past

are increasingly being challenged and sometimes eliminated. Some of these changes are for the better, some not. Real estate prices have risen 36 percent in the past two years as retirees moving in from other areas compete to buy the few homes available on the small strip of valuable land between the Kalmiopsis Wilderness and the coastline.

When their numbers were small, new residents acclimated to the community and wove themselves into its social fabric. Now, attitudes and positions tend to be more polarized. Neighbors' concerns about smells and contamination from biosolids have forced a farmer to stop spreading the city's treated waste on his land, a practice that he had been doing for the past 27 years. Burn barrels