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Regional Flavor: The Creative Power of Communities

by June Holley¹

The small towns at the intersection of Perry, Athens, and Morgan Counties in Appalachian Ohio, like many rural communities, were hard hit by the economic changes of the last 50 years. Until recently, this set of former coal mining communities had some of the highest poverty rates and unemployment in the region. Now, however, they are a wonderful example of how rural communities can reinvent themselves. These small towns defined and developed their Regional Flavor and, as a result, were able to generate substantial new economic activity.

Several years ago, Sunday Creek, a small community group from Southern Perry County, brought several other local organizations together to identify their assets. This group realized that in addition to a national forest filled with caves and trails, the region was home to hundreds of artisans, an old “opera house,” and charming bed and breakfast cottages. They also remembered that the region was the birthplace of the CIO (one of the first unions) and the site of many fascinating coal mining legends. Virtually all of the small towns had interesting and unusual buildings and company houses dating from the early 20th century.

As a result of this exploration, the Sunday Creek group decided to consider themselves a microregion and named themselves Little Cities of the Black Diamonds. Working as a small collaborative project, a set of tours was arranged that allowed residents from nearby cities to learn basketry or pottery making in artisans’ workshops, sample local foods, and stay in a rustic bed and breakfast (B & B).

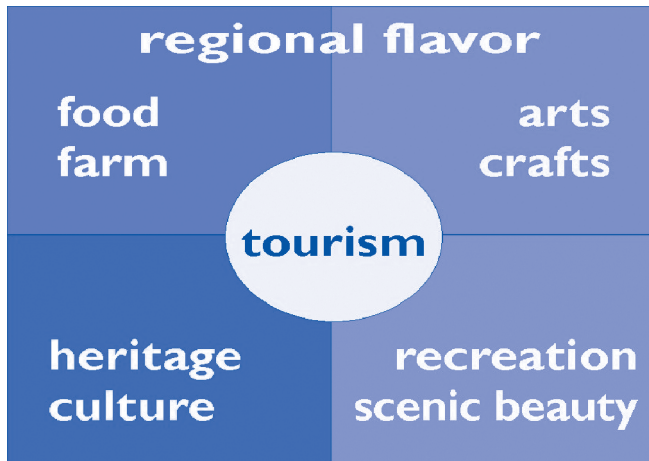
Unlike most tourism initiatives, planning went beyond appealing to tourists. Artisans and other businesses were helped to upgrade their operations and develop new regional markets, and then they were helped to manage their expanded operations. Following the success of the tours, several other experiments were undertaken—an artisan cooperative in an abandoned nunnery, a driving map of the region, and a technology center that helped artisans create online stores—that involved hundreds of people from the small towns in their design and implementation.

Little Cities of the Black Diamonds was one of the first manifestations of something we called “Regional Flavor,” which helps communities use their distinctive qualities to add more value to their economy. Like a delightful homemade soup, Regional Flavor encourages local economic developers and residents to uncover their region’s unique assets—places to visit, restaurants, artisan businesses, history and heritage, recreational activities, music, festivals, foods, or other aspects—and package these assets into experiences that attract more people to live in or visit their community and help stimulate local economy.

The building blocks of Regional Flavor are microregions where tourism, artisan, food, recreation, and heritage organizations work together on a continual stream of region-building projects. In the process, these projects enhance the uniqueness and quality of area businesses, encourage many local and regional consumers to develop long-term buying relationships with those entrepreneurs and the region, and train local organizations to work together effectively.

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With Natallie Keiser, formerly of AEO, she authored *Regional Flavor: Marketing Rural America's Unique Assets*. This book is available at www.microenterpriseworks.org or by calling 703/841-7760. The cost of the book is \$5.00.



How does Regional Flavor differ from many other tourism initiatives?

- Regional Flavor initiatives are about regional collaboration. They involve many different organizations

and entrepreneurs working together across political boundaries.

- Regional Flavor initiatives go beyond most tourism efforts because they focus on helping businesses innovate, set up new systems, and expand.
- Regional Flavor initiatives focus on nearby urban markets and work to build long-term relationships with the residents there so that they feel a part of the region, which includes the surrounding rural communities.
- Regional Flavor projects engage many local entrepreneurs and residents, and through the process of their involvement, help to increase their pride and engagement in the region.
- Regional Flavor initiatives are primarily about helping businesses of all types, not just tourism-related businesses, develop regional products and services.

The Emergence of Regional Markets and Regional Businesses

In the past several decades, many rural regions have been devastated by unsettling economic forces—the loss of farm families as part of the shift to larger-scale operations and the flight of rural manufacturing to lower-wage countries. Meanwhile, many local businesses that were unable to compete with national chain stores closed.

At the same time, an increasing number of rural communities are thriving by identifying new opportunities for regional products and services. These communities have discovered that a sizable set of consumers are developing a taste for regional products: the demand for “Buy Local” food products has surpassed the demand for organics. This desire for regional products is now moving to other sectors: more people are vacationing within three hours of their homes, and the demand for regional household items is on the rise (Randall and Gustke 2005). Regional Flavor is an effort to harness this pent-up demand and use it to revitalize rural communities.

To be effective, the Regional Flavor strategy requires *local* businesses—from retail operations and construction businesses to artisans, furniture makers, and local theatres—to become *regional* businesses. To accomplish

this, the businesses must enhance their uniqueness and quality as well as reach out to a regional, not just a local, consumer base. Often, this shift can be jumpstarted by creating an appeal to tourists as well as local residents. Restaurants, for example, often strive to develop a regional image and market in nearby urban centers. To be successful, however, entrepreneurs need to develop signature products and services to be sold throughout the region.

Traditional tourism businesses are not the only businesses that can develop Regional Flavor strategies. For example, a set of construction businesses in Appalachian Ohio are starting to work with the construction degree program at Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio, to design cabin kits (possibly to be manufactured by students as part of their work experience) for the expanding tourism market in the area (the construction degree at Hocking College in Nelsonville, Ohio). If successful, local construction businesses will be able to access post and beam and other innovative construction products, which will appeal to higher-end regional customers, and will facilitate the building of more cabins throughout the region.

What Is a Region?

A region is a defined area consisting of one or more urban areas plus the surrounding rural areas and small towns that represent a strong market for rural goods and services. Regional Flavor is not a brand manufactured by a consultant. In fact, regional advocates attempting to produce a regional brand as a starting point for expanding regional markets have failed. Instead, Regional Flavor emerges from the development and weaving together of

many microregions. Microregions consist of sets of small communities, such as the Little Cities of Black Diamonds, which often cross county boundaries. Microregions are often based on history or natural features. The most authentic Regional Flavor will emerge as communities are encouraged to identify their assets and use them as seeds for the development of regional products and services.

Four Steps to Regional Flavor

There are four steps in the Regional Flavor process:

1. Identify natural, heritage, and place-based assets and add value to them. Rural communities often have difficulty identifying some of their most appealing assets. One set of communities found that their old, unpainted barns could be an asset. At the same time, this group also realized that birdwatchers coming to their region were an asset that was not being utilized to add value to the local economy. By the novel combining of these two “hidden” assets, a Regional Flavor initiative was used to generate considerable new economic activity and begin the development of a microregion.

Many people come to southern Appalachian Ohio to watch birds. But until recently, they came for the day and then left, often without spending much money at all. After realizing this fact, the local Audubon Society joined with the Ohio Arts Council (OAC) and several other local organizations to create a brochure that highlighted some of the other treasures of the region and encouraged birdwatchers to stay longer in the area.²

In the wonderful way Regional Flavor projects unearth surprises, the project took an unexpected turn. An OAC staffer’s mother belonged to a quilting group that was partnering with artisans to paint quilt squares on barns. These two groups joined forces to develop a brochure and map that not only included birding spots and quilt barns, but B & Bs, gift shops, and restaurants. As a result of the increased traffic, several of the barn owners set up gift shops in their barns, artisans began making quilt square puzzles, and a B & B added a restaurant to its facilities. Now, other parts of the region have also invested in mapping quilt barns and birding trails, providing new opportunities for visitors to return year after year to enjoy different parts of the region.³

Other types of assets to be developed include historical sites, musical venues, artisans, parks, and other recreational facilities. For example, the town of Albany, Ohio, in Athens County identified an unusual fruit that grows wild in the woods—the pawpaw—as an asset. Residents there developed an annual festival—the Pawpaw Festival—that features this fruit. Artisans make wooden and handblown glass pawpaws for sale, food vendors serve pawpaw ice cream, and major regional and national magazines urge people to attend. Thousands of people come from within the region to enjoy the music and the food and through their participation, add considerably to the economy of this microregion.

A Regional Flavor Checklist (see p. 4) is a useful tool to help a collaborative project understand all the facets involved in Regional Flavor initiatives. This checklist can be used to help collaborative project group critique existing websites from other regions as well as to guide their own efforts.

2. Help every locally owned business or place be world class, unique, continually innovating, and a quality job creator. Research shows innovative businesses that develop new products and services create more jobs, higher-paying jobs, and more wealth (Cainelli et al. 2001). It follows that helping area businesses become more innovative is an excellent investment strategy that can also initiate a Regional Flavor.

For example, the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) (www.acenetnetworks.org), a regional entrepreneurship organization, operates a Kitchen Incubator—a licensed processing facility where farmers can rent the use of equipment to process their produce into high-value products. As part of their work with farmers, the ACEnet staff links farmers to packaging supplies and label designs that promote both the unique qualities and

² See brochure and additional information at Adams County Travel and Visitors Bureau (2006).

³ For information on other quilt barns in Appalachian Ohio, see the Our Ohio (2006) website.

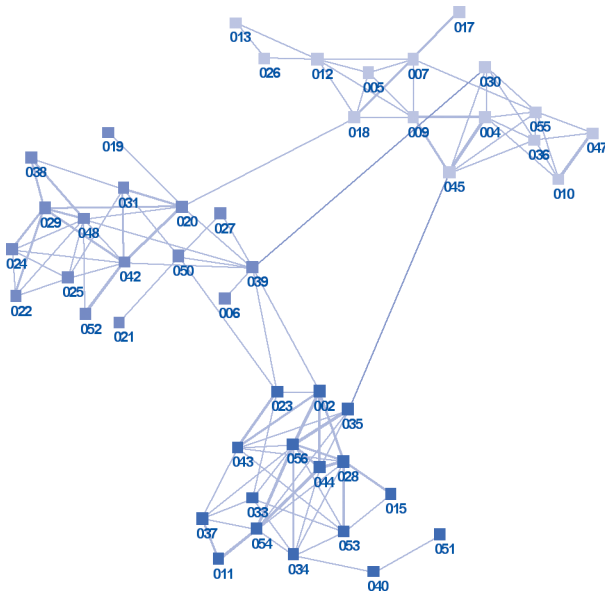
Regional Flavor Checklist for Websites or Activities

Site _____					
<i>Draws on Regional Assets</i>	<i>Poor</i>			<i>Excellent</i>	
Highlights natural assets (parks, scenic features, etc.)	1	2	3	4	5
Describes uniqueness of natural assets	1	2	3	4	5
Includes cultural and heritage assets	1	2	3	4	5
Face on the place: Tells story of artisans, business owners, and other characters	1	2	3	4	5
Provides stories about the region	1	2	3	4	5
Gives region a unique name	1	2	3	4	5
Has created a compelling but not restricting brand	1	2	3	4	5
Provides information about activities, events, lodging, shopping, and food all in one site	1	2	3	4	5
Connects you to authentic shopping experiences and interactions with artisans and food entrepreneurs	1	2	3	4	5
Offers ways to experience the region	1	2	3	4	5
Enables you to match your interests with activities	1	2	3	4	5
Emotionally connects you to the region	1	2	3	4	5
Makes you want to visit the region	1	2	3	4	5
Shows evidence of organizations/businesses working together to create Regional Flavor	1	2	3	4	5

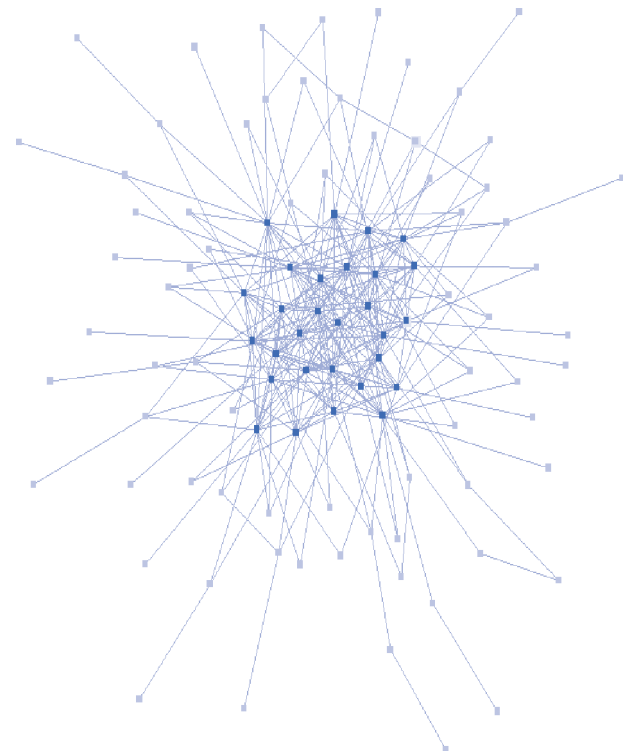
What five adjectives describe the Regional Flavor of this area for you? _____

How would you improve this site so it would more fully represent Regional Flavor? _____

A Typical Network Map of Three Rural Counties with Few Connections



An Ideal Core-Periphery Network



regionality of the products. As a result, these products often sell for many times the price of national brands.

Other ways to increase the innovativeness of area businesses include the following:

- Provide small subsidies for several local businesses to attend trade shows in exchange for offering a workshop for other businesses to learn about new ideas gathered at the trade show.
- Create a group e-mail for area businesses to share trend information and tips on identifying new products or services.
- Help entrepreneurs involved in serving Regional Flavor markets form cluster networks so that they can develop innovative joint marketing initiatives.

3. Catalyze collaborations that weave regional businesses and assets together. Any local or regional organization can take the lead in developing a Regional Flavor initiative. In some communities, a microenterprise or entrepreneurship organization has started the process. In other communities, a regional organization or set of country tourism bureaus has served as the catalyst.

Two keys to successful projects are (1) to work with other organizations that are open to collaboration and willing to learn how to work together effectively, and (2) to keep the first project modest, so the partners experience success. In many rural communities, organizations have little experience working together and may need an incentive for becoming part of a collaboration. In Appalachian Ohio, the regional foundation—The Foundation for Appalachian Ohio—set up the Yellowroot Fund. This seed fund provides small grants (\$300 to \$3,000) to collaborations working with entrepreneurs on Regional Flavor Projects. Each project must involve two or more organizations and entrepreneurs, match requested funds with additional capital and/or sweat equity, and share what it learns with others. The several dozen projects supported by this fund thus far have been critical in building a culture of innovation in the region.

Regional Flavor projects can include activities such as festivals, clusters, arts districts, web pages, and heritage and cultural trails. In Nelsonville—a former coal mining town with 16 percent unemployment and many empty storefronts—a group of artisans decided to open a set of attractive retail shops. Now, with more than two dozen stores and restaurants, the Nelsonville Square is a vibrant arts district. Recently, the artisan shops joined in applying for a Yellowroot grant that, when combined with their own dollars, created a colorful marketing brochure which includes a walking map of the square (The Foundation for Appalachian Ohio 2006; Starbrick City 2006; see also The Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina 2006; Yarra Valley Net 2006; WesstArtisans 2006).

Another Regional Flavor project area is a new generation of web pages. These Regional Flavor web pages combine tourism web pages that highlight recreational activities with pages that encourage people to stay in locally owned cabins or B & B operations, eat in local restaurants, and build a long-term emotional bond with the region by connecting with the people as well as the places. The next stage will be to help people package experiences based on their specific interests. For example, someone interested in trail biking, collectibles, and southern cooking would be able to find the restaurants, trails, and antique malls in a given region through a common, multi-county website.

4. Make urban areas feel they are part of the region. One of the most damaging divides in our country is the one that exists between urban areas and the surrounding rural communities. As food production became increasingly commodified in the last century, rural communities no longer produced food solely for their urban neighbors. Urban residents too often ignore their rural counterparts as not being relevant to their daily existence.

Regional Flavor initiatives can heal this divide, and in the process, help create more resilient economies. When urban residents identify themselves as being part of a region, consciously spending more of their food, household, and recreation dollars on regional goods and services, rural communities flourish and thrive.

Why would urban residents shift their purchasing patterns? Some possible answers might include the rapidly growing segment of consumers who are already making an effort to purchase “local” foods. Also, members of environmental groups or sustainability efforts, such as church congregations interested in ending poverty in rural communities; higher-end consumers who value authentic, unique, and handcrafted products for their homes; and architects and interior designers serving the fast-growing LEEDs-certified green housing market, can be mobilized to become urban Regional Flavor markets.

Several approaches can be used to build these urban-rural connections. First, the marketing of regional farm produce and specialty foods at urban farmers’ markets can be accompanied by brochures and informal conversations describing the importance of regional purchasing.

Next, rural counties can join together to develop Regional Flavor tourism campaigns that draw urban residents to experience the rural delights of their region. When tourism campaigns include face-to-face time with artisans, experiential tour guides, and other residents, a sense of caring for the region and the very real people they have met begins to develop.

Websites can weave deeper commerce bonds by helping regional residents put together regional experiences that reflect their interests, sharing stories about the people and the region, and providing opportunities for ongoing purchasing of regional products even after they return home

from visits. Finally, new regional distribution and marketing systems will be needed since it is currently easier to get local pasta shipped to a grocery chain in Utah than it is to truck it to all the retail outlets for food in a town 50 miles away.

The Importance of Networks to Successful Regional Flavor Initiatives

The success of Regional Flavor initiatives depends on the weaving of effective networks that reach across county and even state lines, across organizational silos, and into urban areas. This type of inclusive, innovative, and collaborative network is called a Smart Network, and it includes a large core of people who know each other well and have worked together effectively on projects. It also has a large periphery of people, often from outside the community, who introduce local residents to new ideas and resources.

It is worth taking the time to map your regional network. This can be done by using mapping software or a marker on a whiteboard. Individuals (or organizations) can be represented

with circles containing their name, while their relationships (“Do they work together?” is a great question to ask) become a set of lines connecting them. If the resulting map shows many disconnected clusters, then people interested in supporting Regional Flavor initiatives must introduce some of the people in each cluster to each other. It also will be important to add people to the network, especially individuals in urban areas who have well-developed networks in their community. By linking urban and rural networks, vibrant regional economies can emerge. These regional economies can create high-quality jobs, a sense of pride in place, and a set of skills and relationships that will enable us to create communities that are healthy for everyone.

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