

Circuit riders: Locals love them



By Sylvia Lewis

Linda Bush and Steve Werner may be strangers, but they have a lot in common. Although she lives in Upstate New York and he in northern California, both work as circuit riders in rural areas where planning and management expertise is scarce. These hip-pocket planners travel from town to town, helping local officials with tasks that range from the mundane to the sophisticated—with the balance toward the former.

Circuit riding involves lots of driving and night meetings and often requires intimate knowledge of junkyards and potholes. The pay is modest: usually between \$15,000 and \$20,000 a year.

But what the job lacks in glamour, it makes up for in gratitude. For without circuit riders, many small-town officials might be floundering. That is why small towns all around the country are dipping into their meager coffers to pay the salaries of these part-time aides.

Until last year, small towns could tap various federal sources to pay for circuit riders. HUD, the Economic Development Administration, the Office of Personnel Management, and the Department of Agriculture underwrote circuit rider programs throughout rural America. Depending on their funding, the circuit riders either limited their efforts to planning tasks or became involved in all aspects of local government, from budgeting to buying police radar equipment. Often the money was funneled through regional planning commissions, cooperative extension agents, or economic development districts.

Now the federal dollars have virtually disappeared. In some cases, state governments have taken up the slack. In other instances, local communities have banded together on their own to pool their money and share a circuit rider.

Snow country planner

Circuit riders go by many names. Some are called rural aides; others are called technical assistants. Linda Bush's official title is local government adviser. She acts as a management and planning assistant to 11 towns and four villages in northern Oneida County, New York.

Her territory is an agricultural area north of Syracuse where the communities range in population from 690 to 6,900. Local officials work part-time without pay; "they like to have someone do leg work for them—not to make decisions but to advise," Bush says.

The questions they have asked since she began her job last October include quite basic ones, like how to write a local ordinance and file it with the state. But Bush, trained as a planner, has tackled planning jobs as well. She has helped one community to tighten up its junkyard ordinance and another one to liberalize its mobile home regulations.

Bush's situation may be unique. The Northern Oneida County Council of Governments, her employer, was formed last year specifically to provide technical and planning assistance to the council's 18 communities.

As it turns out, 15 of those communities now benefit from Bush's help. The others have not yet enrolled in the program. Each of the 15 participants contributes \$200 a year toward Bush's program, which costs about \$37,000 altogether. The rest of her costs are paid by the Oneida County Planning Department and the Tug Hill Commission, a regional organization that is entirely funded by New York State.

Though unusual, the circumstances of Bush's employment show that local government can step in to help fill a funding gap. In this instance, the step was taken at the urging of county and regional agencies already experienced with circuit riding.

An Upstate New York circuit rider meets with a part-time town supervisor during the lunch hour.



Do-it-yourself

The Oneida County Planning Department is using some of the last available Section 111 money from the Farmers Home Administration to hire a circuit rider for tasks involving planning and financial management. The new staffer will develop a management model to help communities handle their limited finances.

He or she will also prepare an operating manual so that local government officials will be able to run their communities without aid, in the event that Section 111 money runs out and no substitute is found.

Will the Oneida County program last over the long haul? "That depends on its success when it's under way," says John Kent, principal planner for the county. "It will really depend on how much lobbying comes from the bottom up."

Picking up the baton

The Tug Hill Commission, which also has run its own circuit-rider programs since 1977, now employs three circuit riders. These three individuals assist local planning boards within the commission's territory. That region includes parts of the four counties lying between Syracuse and Watertown.

Tug Hill's three circuit riders are not professional planners. Instead, they offer help with the run-of-the-mill tasks of local government. If planning problems arise, the circuit riders consult with the commission's staff planners.

Does circuit riding make planning more acceptable in small towns? "No question about it," says Ben Coe, the commission's executive director. "Programs that might have seemed scary aren't when they're done over a period of time. There's nothing like a step at a time to sell planning."

Steve Werner concurs. "People here have been receptive to planning concepts," he says, adding that planning has succeeded even though

property rights remains a hot topic in his corner of California.

Werner works in Ferndale and Rio Dell, located in rural Humboldt County. This region is part of the vast stretch of rain country between San Francisco and the Oregon border. Until 1981, when HUD 701 money dried up, Ferndale and Rio Dell were part of a five-city circuit-riding program that had been operating since 1975; Werner was one of the circuit riders.

Now the two cities pay his part-time salary on their own, covering most of the costs through permit fees. At the moment, Werner is busy

writing a historic preservation ordinance for Ferndale. He has also been involved in coastal planning and economic development efforts.

At its height, Humboldt County's five-city program employed six people. Five circuit riders were assigned to specific cities, and all six worked on specialized planning tasks.

Winning ways

Rob Jacobi, who ran the program for over two years, until its demise in 1981, calls it a great success. Among its accomplishments, he says, were revised general plans and upgraded



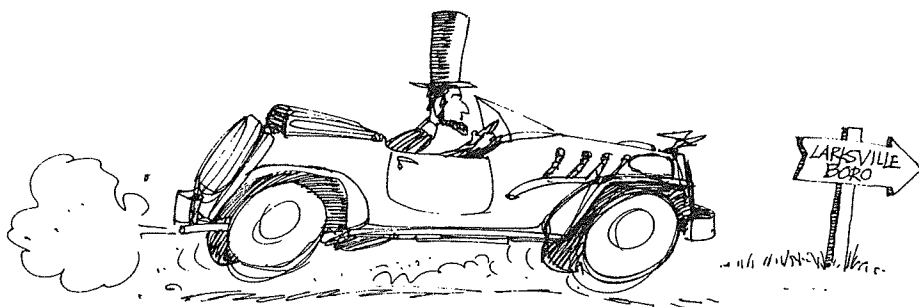
City of Fortuna, Calif.

Snowy winters make circuit riding hazardous duty in Upstate New York (below). Bob Davis (above), now city manager of Fortuna, had an easier time, weatherwise, when he rode a five-city circuit in California. (Photos below and on pages 18 and 20 courtesy Tug Hill Commission; drawings courtesy Pennsylvania Cooperative Extension Service.)



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**Small towns are
paying for their own
circuit riders.**



zoning ordinances for all five cities and economic development plans for three of them.

The results: Rio Dell in 1978 nailed down a \$250,000 housing rehabilitation grant from HUD and formed a local development corporation to improve its downtown, for which plans are now being drawn up. Fortuna also set up an economic development corporation with HUD money and established a revolving loan fund for small business there.

In addition, Blue Lake spent a \$20,000 Economic Development Administration planning grant to design an industrial park, which is now being marketed. And Trinidad, one of the smallest communities in the state, became the first city to gain approval for its coastal plan from the California Coastal Commission.

"These five communities were predisposed to planning," says Jacobi, "but they also saw that they needed

help with it." Not only Ferndale and Rio Dell, but the other three cities as well, have continued to employ planners despite the formal shutdown of the circuit-riding program.

The same holds true in many small towns, even those that opposed planning and zoning at first. The communities in northwestern Wisconsin provide an example of continued support for planning (see box), and so do those in Stanislaus County, California.

Help thy neighbor

Until last year, 701 funds picked up half the costs for the circuit rider in Stanislaus County, and the two communities that shared his services paid for the other half. Now the two towns still pay half, but the rest of the \$34,000 is divided among the remaining members of the Stanislaus Area Association of Governments.

"When 701 died, we thought we'd

have to bug the other communities," recalls Doyle Dodd, executive director of the association. "But that wasn't necessary. They said, 'We owe it to those two. Small communities should get some benefit from the association.'"

Both Patterson and Waterford, the two communities that share the circuit rider, have a population of about 3,000. They found that what they needed most was a current planner—someone who could develop ordinances, oversee rezoning and subdivision permits, and provide general planning assistance. The person who does the job now spends half his time in the two towns and the rest on association business.

California cutbacks

Not all California towns will be that lucky. Some communities can't count on their neighbors for help in hiring circuit riders, and they may not be able to count on largesse from the state, either.

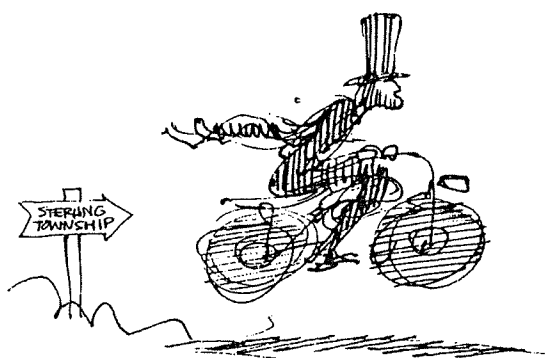
David Williamson, of the California Department of Housing and Community Development, says the state has no real substitute for 701 funds. The Small Cities CDBG program, which he runs, can provide funds for circuit-riding planners, but only for work on specific projects.

"The project would have to be ready now," says Williamson. "We can't give money for a first-time plan-

The Tug Hill region includes many tiny villages like Highmarket.

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ning effort." In other words, although 209 communities are eligible for the program, the odds are against their tapping into it to hire circuit riders.

Forging ahead

Circuit riding is getting stronger state support in Oklahoma. The state, through its Department of Economic and Community Affairs, is underwriting the lion's share of the costs for circuit-riding managers in about 30 towns within five regions. According to Gerald Wilkins, who manages the program, the circuit riders advise local officials on everything from capital improvements to organizing a chamber of commerce.

Although the state apparently intends to continue the program indefinitely, the money it provides for circuit riding (\$109,000 this year) is essentially seed money. Cities must contribute 20 percent toward the circuit rider's costs during the first year

and increase their share to 50 percent by the third year. After the third year, the cities are on their own. The state goes on to fund new communities.

Another unusual feature of the Oklahoma program is its tight structure. Gerald Wilkins explains that his agency mostly provides backup for the participating cities and their circuit riders.

The actual hiring is done through a regional council that the cities automatically become part of when they join the program. In addition, an advisory committee composed of city managers, planners, and university people meets regularly to deal with problems and recommend applicants for the circuit-rider positions.

Planning can be sold if it's done a step at a time.

Wilkins says part of his job involves selling communities on the circuit-riding program. "Some of them say, 'We don't want a smart aleck from Oklahoma City telling us what to do.'"

Further, because the program is just now closing out its third year, there is no way to tell whether the cities will pick up where the state leaves off and continue to fund circuit riders with strictly local dollars. Wilkins has, however, noticed signs of interest

around the state. He says four or five new areas are ready to jump on board.

A big audience

New York, California, and Oklahoma are only a few examples of states that have run circuit rider programs. Others—including Illinois, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Colorado, Minnesota, and Iowa—also have tried the idea and found that it works.

If anything, the concept seems to be spreading. Despite cutting other planning and management programs, Congress this year allotted \$800,000 for a rural water program involving circuit riders in 22 states. The money took the form of a grant from the Farmers Home Administration to the National Rural Water Association, which in turn has subcontracted with state associations to hire the circuit riders. Those 22 individuals each make 400 calls a year to rural water districts in need of help.

So many circuit-riding programs have been in operation in recent years that it is impossible to assess their overall impact. But, while circuit riders have not met with equal success everywhere, it appears that, more often than not, they have helped small-town officials with the tough tasks of running their communities. The fact that small towns have continued to employ the circuit riders shows that the federal seed money was spent to good purpose.

Sylvia Lewis is the editor of Planning.

For more information

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has compiled a packet of materials on circuit riding. Request a free copy of "Circuit Riders for Small Community and Rural Development" from:

Bob Lovan
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Extension
Community and Rural Development
Room 5048—South Bldg.
14th and Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Two books on the Tug Hill Commission contain information on circuit riding:

Cooperative Rural Planning: A Tug Hill Case Study. Elizabeth Redfield Marsh. Cooperative Tug Hill Planning Board, c/o Betty Adler, Hoffman Road, Holland Patent, NY 13354. 1981. 147 pp. \$11.45.

The Tug Hill Program. Cynthia D. Dyballa, Lyle S. Raymond, Jr., and Alan J. Hahn. Syracuse University Press, 1011 E. Water St., Syracuse, NY 13210. 1981. 170 pp. \$11.95.

