

Regional tourism group holds development conference

By Sarah Reed. The Marshall Democrat-News: August 3, 2012.

Although there are more than 100 wineries in Missouri, the "wine cluster," as Brian Dabson calls it, is still growing.

Dabson, of the Rural Policy Research Institute, noted when one thinks of Napa Valley, in California, wine is the first thought to come to mind. A wine cluster refers to the surrounding businesses that benefit from the success of a winery. It may take time, but Missouri's entrepreneurs are making strides toward that as well.

Dabson spoke during an Old Trails Regional Tourism Partnership summit Thursday afternoon, and stated the nine-county region is already boundary crossing. OTRTP formed to encourage collaboration between businesses as well as to create and strengthen brands for the central northwest region.

"People think rural America is dying," Dabson said. "I have a very strong belief that ... the future is all around us. ... We have to start shifting attitudes."

Challenges to Old Trails, which stretches along the Missouri River from Jackson and Clay counties to the western edge of Boone County, are establishing a regional identity, a big tent idea and working through state and federal policies, among others. Missouri wine was just one example cited as a possible brand for the region.

Dabson also noted the proximity to the river, which could eventually play a role in tourism development. But location is only a small part of the equation. Speaker Troy Nash, of Zimmer Real Estate Group, reiterated business is about people.

"It's people that are innovators. It's people that are entrepreneurs," he said.

He noted trusting your instincts, not shying away from breaking rules and not being afraid to fail are attributes for a successful business. Nash feels as long as the region holds a strong entrepreneurial spirit, with people willing to take risks, there's hope for economic development.

"Communities that are succeeding ... are those that are taking this economic and fiscal downturn, not as an excuse to do nothing, but to plan and to move forward and address the realities," Nash continued.

Old Trails is working to establish a national scenic byway, following the Santa Fe Trail from Fort Osage to Boonville. The group is also developing its Missouri Regional Cuisines Project, which focuses on marketing Missouri food products with specific labels and geographic indicators that highlight the food or wines' origins. Old Trails hopes to preserve and showcase the region's history, charm, cultural heritage and scenic resources.

OTRTP President Don Borgman alluded to the five years of development since the organization's inception. The volunteer group plans to write several grants in order to designate a full time executive director as well as have deeper resources for marketing the region.

"Forget about these boundaries created by county lines," he said. "The economy can be impacted."

To find out more about Old Trails, visit www.oldtrails.net.