

# Gorge's high-tech high life

The lifestyle lures workers, and the job growth lifts the area

Saturday, March 08, 2008

**KERI BRENNER**

Special to The Oregonian

**HOOD RIVER** -- For Lisa Williams, life in the bucolic shadow of Mount Hood is perfectly compatible with operating at the core of a bustling tech-industry cluster.

"I started my business so I wouldn't have to drive to Portland every day," said Williams, 42, founder and chief executive of Media Forte Marketing, which helps businesses heighten their online presence so that they turn up more prominently in searches. "We moved here 11 years ago for my kids' dad's job, but we've stayed for the lifestyle."

She's not alone. A growing number of technology professionals have been finding their way to Hood River, The Dalles and across the Columbia River to the Washington communities of Bingen, White Salmon and Goldendale.

Tech employment has been quietly expanding in the gorge for years, growing from a handful of companies in 1998 to about 50 companies today with a wide variety of specialties -- from unmanned aviation to Web design. The 2006 arrival of search-engine behemoth Google Inc. merely cemented the sector's prospects.

The Mountain View, Calif., company, which generated \$4.2 billion in profit last year, employs close to 200 staff and contract workers at its massive computer server complex in The Dalles. It's also made the community part of its long-term plans, partnering with Columbia Gorge Community College to develop a technology training program.

Williams and others have stepped up efforts to promote tech in the region, including an upcoming regional search-engine marketing conference at the Portland Zoo.

Colleen Wright, a presenter at the Monday event, says search-engine marketing has increased because it's measurable.

"You can see your results and see what's working," said Wright, of the Search Engine Academy in Beaverton, a training program. "You are able to get top search results if you follow certain guidelines -- more visibility, more sales."

The gorge's scenic beauty and destination status for windsurfing, skiing and other outdoor activities are persuasive tools for attracting highly skilled workers.

"A lot of these people have chosen to move there for lifestyle reasons," said Bryce Yonker, membership director of Portland-based Software Association of Oregon.

Others are relocating -- often with spouses who also need jobs -- to established companies such as Insitu Inc., an unmanned aviation firm in Bingen that employs 275.

"We attract people who really enjoy the gorge," said Steve Sliwa, Insitu CEO and founder of the Gorge Technology Alliance, a local trade group with about 50 members who meet for networking, education and to promote the gorge lifestyle.

Sliwa said the networking, in particular, brings Insitu in the path of smaller companies that can serve as suppliers or possible employers for the spouses of relocated staffers.  
Advertisement

Yonker's group and the Gorge Technology Alliance are partnering on several events -- including a March 20 gathering in Hood River -- and to create the statewide group's first outreach program in the gorge area.

Sliwa, whose company fills 10 buildings and has grown from revenues of \$2.5 million in 2004 to \$85 million last year, says he is sensitive to local concerns that the tech boom will erode the very amenities that attracted people in the first place.

"One good thing is the Gorge Scenic Area overlay," he said, referring to development and zoning restrictions administered and enforced by the Columbia Gorge Commission. "There can't really be unbridled growth."

He said the goal is to manage growth to reverse the gorge's historically high unemployment rate while being careful to preserve the environment.

Education and economic leaders, meanwhile, are delighted by the rising demand for workers who can fill those high-paying jobs.

An estimated 400 to 500 jobs will be opening in renewable energy technologies such as wind power in the next three years, said Susan Wolff, chief academic officer for the Columbia Gorge Community College in The Dalles.

"It's really phenomenal," she said of the response to its wind power and renewable energy technician classes. Not only is the college being swamped with applications, it's adding two-year and certificate programs. Many students are being wooed for \$80,000-a-year tech jobs even before they graduate, Wolff said.

The college, in conjunction with the Mid-Columbia Economic Development District and Google, also is conducting a needs analysis with the local tech industry to consider creating a certificate or degree program for information technology and software professionals, Wolff said.

Meanwhile, some companies are making accommodations for staffers interested in a more urban lifestyle. Google, for example, runs a shuttle to Portland for employees, many of them single and interested in the city's social scene.

Sliwa said Insitu staffers haven't complained about social prospects in the gorge.

"I don't know," he said. "It's pretty fun being single in the gorge in the summer."

Business news: 503-221-8200; [money@news.oregonian.com](mailto:money@news.oregonian.com)

---

## FACTBOX

### If you go

Friday, March 07, 2008

#### **Search Engine Marketing Professionals conference**

**When & where:** 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Monday, Oregon Zoo, Cascade Crest Banquet Center, 4001 S.W. Canyon Road, Portland Cost: \$239 for SEMPDX members, \$349 for nonmembers, \$150 for students. Tickets will be available at the door. For information: [www.sempdx.org/Events/SearchFest/SearchFest-08](http://www.sempdx.org/Events/SearchFest/SearchFest-08)

#### **Software Association of Oregon/Gorge Technology Alliance meeting**

**When & where:** noon, March 20, Hood River County Commissioners Building, 601 State St., Hood River Cost: \$10 for members of either group; \$20 for nonmembers (includes lunch) Preregister at [www.SAO.org](http://www.SAO.org) Speakers: Craig Sabina, chief executive of Summit Projects, a Web design and online creative services company in Hood River; and Lisa Williams, CEO of Media Forte Marketing in Hood River, a search engine marketing company