

When five South Carolina shrimpers journeyed to Alaska in March, a community cold storage facility in Petersburg was one of the items on their itinerary.



The name of the place was, appropriately, Petersburg Community Cold Storage.

Not very sexy but pretty damn cool. Literally and figuratively.

Some 411:

Size - 6,500 square feet

Storage capacity - 500,000 pounds.

Gear - Blast freezer, glazing tank, plate freezer.

Products stored - Seafood, bait, wild game, groceries.

Yes, Sam's Club aficionados, it's true. If you are a volume shopper, you can store frozen food like a pro. You just have to pay like everybody else. The monthly rate for personal use: \$15 per shelf.

The per-shelf service is also useful for subsistence hunters and gatherers and gardeners. No need to crowd up your home freezer with that moose haunch, or those gallons and gallons of berries.

Cold storage is also available to restaurants and grocery stores.

The actual freezers -- the machines that freeze food -- are a different story. Freezing equipment is available only to state-licensed seafood processors. If you want to rent time on the freezing machines, which are not inexpensive, you have to go through orientation and training to make sure you can handle the equipment properly.

Then you can schedule freezing time to your heart's content. Just make sure you have enough product to make it worth your while. The plate freezer has a capacity of 10,000 pounds per hour; the blast freezer, 75,000 pounds per hour.

You are probably wondering, how much did this cost, and where did the money come from? Well here you go. The facility cost over \$2.2 million dollars. \$500,000 of this was local money and the rest was from state and federal coffers.

This fabulous funding feat was the work of the Petersburg Economic Development Council, which owns and operates the cold storage facility. And this Council has a unique economic development strategy.

They are not going after the high tech, knowledge based business that most communities covet. Although I'm sure that if Google wanted to relocate their corporate headquarters to Petersburg, the city wouldn't object. But it isn't likely to happen, and they know it.

The PEDC has a community development vision that is unique in that it is natural-resources-based. Instead of trying to be like other places that play the economic development game, they embrace who they are, and channel their energies into making the most of what their region has to offer.

This is their mission statement: The PEDC mission is to provide steady moderate growth that results in a strong diversified economy compatible with our traditional resources-based lifestyle.

And these are their goals:

- Encourage growth of our traditional fishing, seafood processing and timber industries;
- Support local businesses in their efforts to grow;
- Diversify the economy in ways that are compatible with our lifestyles and interests by nurturing visitation by independent tourists; telecommunications; recreational opportunities; and the services, businesses, activities and facilities that support retirement and comfortable living

for our residents;

- Build upon our strategic location at the geographic center of Southeast Alaska;
- Develop and grow in a manner compatible with both use and enjoyment of our natural surroundings and resources.

Wow. Among all those words there is an underlying theme: quality of life.

For example, instead of bringing in buses full of bargain shoppers, they are catering to inquisitive, independent tourists who appreciate the local culture and ecosystem.

So, besides building community cold storage, which had its first full year of operation in 2007, what else are they doing to realize that vision?

Well, they developed an Alaska Rainforest Islands promotion program, for starters. They did an inventory of local assets, created a demographic profile of visitors, developed a marketing and branding strategy, and now they have www.alaskarainforestislands.com, a web site that helps nature-lovers explore all the opportunities in the heart of Alaska's Inside Passage.

"Heart of Alaska's Inside Passage" is their slogan, and it is indeed catchy. Besides being metaphorically interesting -- you know, something that's inside something that's already inside. PEDC also created a local program to help small businesses get loans. There were hard-working entrepreneurs there who couldn't get a bank loan because they didn't have collateral. So PEDC established a revolving fund for start-ups. If a new business needs \$100,000, and the bank requires \$25,000 in collateral, the PEDC will guarantee the \$25,000, and that guy can get his money and get to work. There is a screening process, of course -- they don't just hand out the money -- but it represents a meaningful commitment to growing small businesses in Petersburg.

As for the future, they are studying the possibility of developing a boatyard. All those fishing boats need some place to haul out and do maintenance.

Which brings us to some of the major differences between us and Petersburg. There, almost 50% of all workers are employed in commercial fisheries, and their numbers are rising. Here in the Lowcountry, commercial fishermen are becoming scarce.

The population in Petersburg is declining, as is school enrollment, and the town is losing its lawyers and accountants. In the Lowcountry, on the other hand, population continues to grow, schools are bursting at the seams, and the lawyers and accountants continue to arrive in droves.

This is all the more reason to take a critical look at our natural-resources based industries. They are a component of the quality of life here, and we need to sustain these industries as we grow.

One of the things we lack is community cold storage. We don't have nearly the volume of seafood and wild game that Petersburg has, but we have enough to make it worth our while. What's more, there are federal economic development dollars out there to help us improve our local food system.

If Petersburg -- a town with a population of only 3,000 -- can do it, so can we.