



Gunnison County State of the Community 2025

Gunnison County, Colorado

March 2025

Triple Point Strategic Consulting



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Introduction

The allure of the mountains has drawn people to Gunnison County over the decades, and many were born in the county with family trees extending back generations. Early prospectors sought to strike it rich. In recent decades, “ski bums” migrated here to “live the dream.” For many, Western Colorado University (WCU) serves as a major pull, bringing in students, faculty, and staff who stay for the outdoor recreation, career prospects, and community. In recent years, some have moved to the Valley to enjoy the many amenities while working remotely.

Although this report is titled “State of the Community,” the individuals and households that make up our community are in a variety of situations. Some are finding or creating new opportunities, while others may be struggling to find the next rental unit. Through outreach, other recent studies, and data analysis, this report attempts to capture overall trends, look at the “big picture,” and present it concisely, noting that the county-level data accounts for everyone in the county. We adopt the philosophy that in order to solve problems, we must first understand them.

As a community, we have faced and will continue to face tough choices with difficult trade-offs. Nevertheless, making no choice is also a decision. The inevitable choices are in response to the changes occurring underfoot, whether we like them or not. There is simply no moral or legal right to an unchanging community. Shaping a better future comes down to making hard choices about how best to allocate limited resources, intentionally building community, and accepting the resulting changes.

Purpose

Following the pandemic, the Gunnison County Community Health Coalition (GCCHC) commissioned a data-intensive assessment of the county’s health and socioeconomic conditions. Later titled “The State of the Community Report 2022,” the study found declining behavioral health was highly correlated with deteriorating economic conditions. The GCCHC is comprised of many organizations to collaborate, coordinate, and communicate community health efforts, ranging from accessing basic needs to addressing mental health and substance abuse.

The 2022 report has been used frequently by the GCCHC and its participating organizations to direct program development and secure funding for many projects, most notably providing a Gunnison County Cooperative Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to increase access to mental health services, increasing support for newcomers in the Gunnison Valley through organized outreach and events, supporting and sustaining school-based clinicians in the Gunnison Watershed School District (GWSD), and establishing Gunnison’s first ever men’s sober living home (Harrison 2024).

The purpose of this report is to update the 2022 report by narrowing the focus to the most indicative metrics, understanding the underlying forces, and highlighting opportunities for improvement. For this report, in late 2024, over 30 interviews were conducted with individuals from all over the community, and the Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley (CFGV) conducted a survey, receiving over 130 responses. The survey focused on socioeconomic indicators and behavioral health, including isolation and the county’s high suicide rate. This approach allowed us to explore the state of the community through its residents’ lived experiences. The report begins with summaries of socioeconomic and behavioral health conditions. Cultural influences on behavioral health are presented, followed by a discussion of successful programming and practices. We conclude by recommending achievable next steps.

In the film, “The Paradise Paradox,” Bode Miller and Emmy award-winning filmmaker Brett Rapkin explore the mental health crisis affecting America’s mountain towns, where high rates of suicide and

substance abuse are present in idyllic surroundings. Locally, the screenings drew large crowds and deeply resonated with many attendees who noted how the film reflected their own struggles.

The "paradise paradox" symbolizes the tension between the idyllic image of the Valley and the difficulties of living here, common themes throughout this report. While the county's natural beauty and outdoor lifestyle attract many, financial stress, limited career opportunities, and social isolation often undermine this ideal. The purpose of the film is to shed light on this phenomenon, open dialogues, and move beyond stigma toward solutions. Similarly, we intend to begin conversations aimed at real solutions.

Shifting Demographics

The Gunnison Valley population continues to grow steadily at an annual average rate of 1.0 percent, as it has for decades. At this steady rate, an additional 5,000 people will live here by 2050, requiring nearly 2,500 more housing units along with employment.

The Valley is aging, with the median age increasing from 33 to 37 over the past decade. Most of the age increase occurred in the past 3 years as retirees and remote workers migrated to the area and younger people migrated away and/or moved in at slower rates. These demographic shifts are also evident in school district enrollment. Table 1 shows enrollment in Crested Butte has declined by 9 percent over the past 5 years, evidence of fewer families with school-age children. At the same time, enrollment has increased by 5 percent in Gunnison, where many Hispanic families reside. Overall, the number of students has remained flat. Thus, the median age increase has been driven by adults.

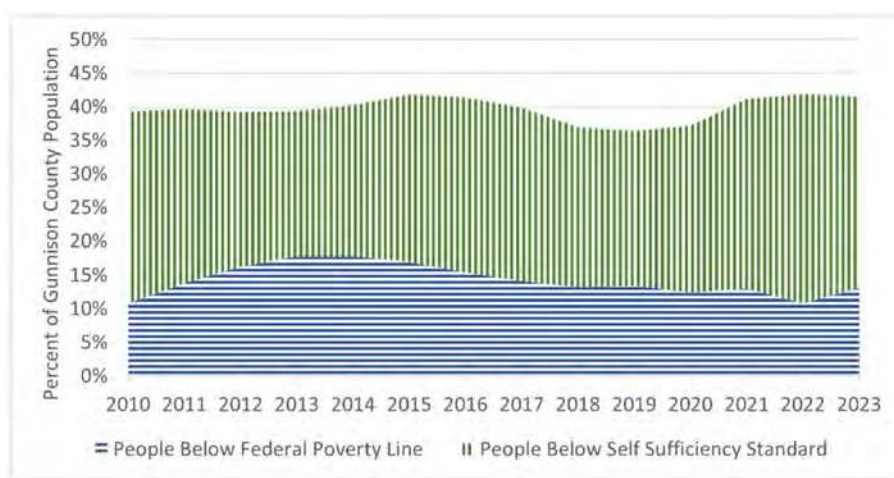
Table 1. School District Enrollment

Community	2019–20	2024–25	% change
Crested Butte	773	704	–9%
Gunnison	1,290	1,358	5%
Total	2,063	2,062	0%

Source: GWSD.

Economic Trends

This section analyzes the county's economy from the household perspective. Single- and multiple-earner households, as well as roommates living together to afford rent, each face unique circumstances. The University of Washington's Center for Women's Welfare Self-Sufficiency Standard (Standard) (2022) "is a budget-based, living wage measure that defines the real cost of living for working families at a minimally adequate level. The Standard is an affordability measure and an alternative to the official poverty measure. The Self-Sufficiency Standard determines the amount of income required for working families to meet basic needs at a minimally adequate level, taking into account family composition, ages of children, and geographic differences in costs." Figure 1 shows the percent of the county's population living on less than the Standard over time, including the subset that lives below the federal poverty line. For the one-in-three residents living above the federal poverty line and below the Standard, life can be particularly stressful since they do not earn enough to make ends meet and yet do not qualify for federal benefits.



Source: ACS; Self-Sufficiency Standard at the Center for Women's Welfare, University of Washington; Consulting Team.

Figure 1. Gunnison County Comparison of Federal Poverty and Self-Sufficiency Standard

The affordability of housing goes beyond rental rates and is also dependent on family size and family structure, as the cost of childcare for some families means they have less money for housing. Table 2 shows the Standards for a single-adult household with two small children, and for a two-adult household with one school-age child. Both are three-person households, however, the cost structures are considerably different, as are the implications for income and wages.

Presumably each of these households lives in the same size unit, thus the housing cost is the same. At \$1,470 for a two-bedroom unit, the Standard is consistent with the most recent housing needs assessment, which found two-bedroom rents in the county range from \$1,292 to \$2,299 (Gunnison Valley Regional Housing Authority 2024). The cost of childcare is almost five times higher for the single adult with two young children. Remember these are “minimally adequate” budgets with no frills and no savings. The result is that the monthly expense budget for the single-adult household is \$8,232 compared to \$6,222 for the two-adult household, primarily driven by the cost of childcare.

The implications for wages are even more skewed. The hourly self-sufficiency wage for a single person must be almost \$47 per hour. In contrast, if each adult in the two-adult household works, the average hourly wage required is just under \$18 per hour. Both scenarios assume the hourly wage is multiplied by 2,112 hours per year. Other wage and hour combinations would work for the two-person household. Likewise, if the single adult earned more than \$47 per hour and did not work full time, the childcare expense could be reduced. As of 2022, the average hourly wage in the county ranged from \$21 to \$22.

Table 2. Self Sufficiency Standards for Two Family Configurations in Gunnison County, 2024

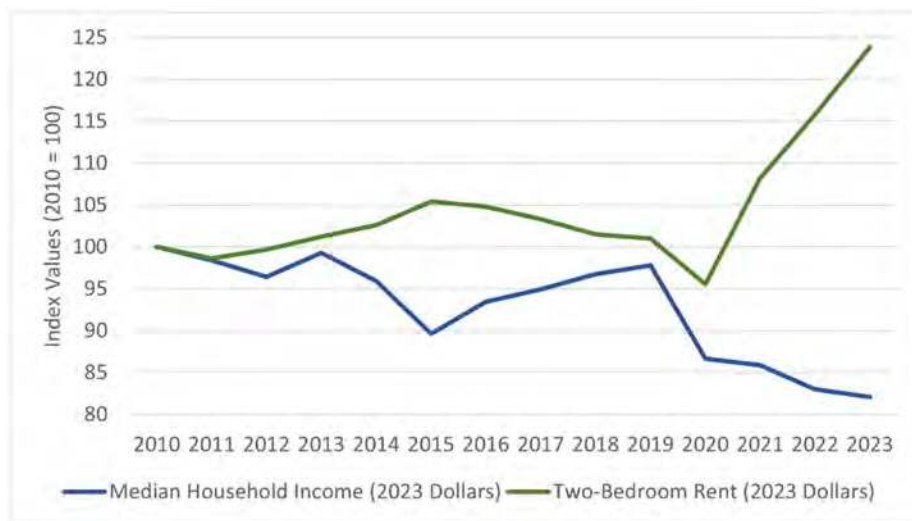
Category	Adult, Infant, Preschooler	2 Adults, 1 School-Age
Housing	\$1,470	\$1,470
Childcare	\$2,665	\$582
Food	\$638	\$845
Transportation	\$401	\$769
Health care	\$953	\$1,055
Broadband and cell phone	\$103	\$147
Other necessities	\$613	\$472

Category	Adult, Infant, Preschooler	2 Adults, 1 School-Age
Taxes	\$1,822	\$1,099
Child tax credits (-)	-\$433	-\$217
Total (monthly income required)	\$8,232	\$6,222
Hourly self-sufficiency wage	\$46.77	\$17.68
Annual self-sufficiency wage	\$98,778	\$74,680

Source: Self-Sufficiency Standard at the Center for Women's Welfare, University of Washington.

Household incomes have not kept up with inflation. Figure 2 compares real median household income to the real average cost of a two-bedroom unit by indexing to 2010. Indexing numerical data allows for quick comparison and is common in economic analysis. By normalizing data to a common starting point, the relative rate of change of variables over time is easily observed.

From 2010 through 2015, incomes declined as housing costs rose. From 2015 to 2019, these diverging trends reversed. The pandemic was another turning point. Real incomes declined 16 percent from 2019 to 2023 as housing costs skyrocketed 23 percent.



Source: ACS; Self-Sufficiency Standard at the Center for Women's Welfare, University of Washington; Consulting Team.

Figure 2. Inflation-Adjusted Comparison of Median Household Income and Average Two-Bedroom Rent

Households with incomes below the Standard face tough trade-offs and struggle to make ends meet.

Declining real incomes and rising costs increase the financial pressure on many households. As a result, over one-third of students in the School District qualify to receive free or reduced meals and activity fees. At the food pantry, requests for food assistance more than quadrupled from 2016 to 2024. Roughly 15 percent of the county population (2,530 people) received food assistance in 2024—60 percent more than 2019.

Food pantry usage remains 60 percent higher than pre-COVID levels.

The cost of living—particularly for basic needs like food and housing—continues to rise, leaving many households with little discretionary income. In this economic climate, seemingly small expenses can become significant burdens, forcing families to make difficult choices about how to spend their money.

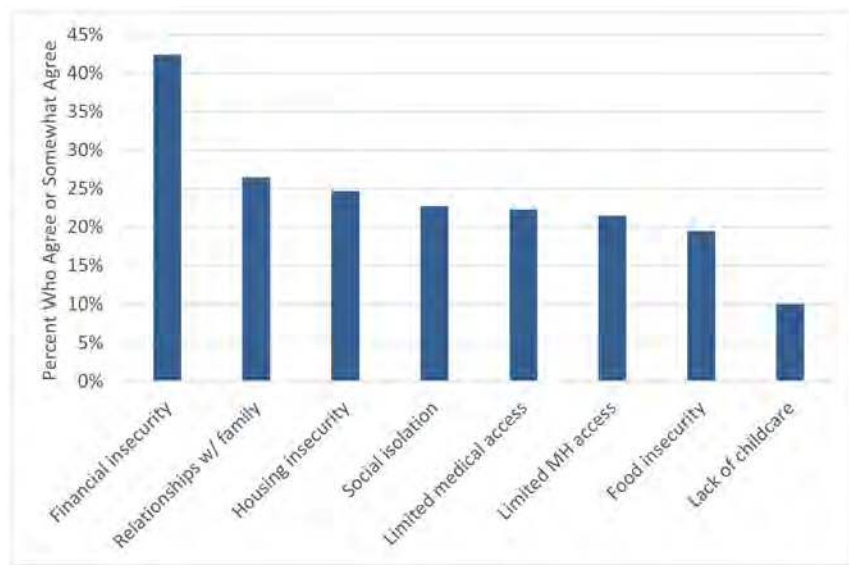
Economic solutions must recognize the disparity between the north and south ends of the county, which has been documented in many studies. For this reason, the Met Rec district chose to pursue a property tax increase only in the north subdistrict. It should come as no surprise that the results of the recent school survey regarding Wednesday early dismissal reflected this disparity. Clearly, there are benefits to having extra time with students dismissed early on Wednesdays—if you can “afford” it. Crested Butte parents see the benefit of early release for sports, activities, recreation, family time, and academic support. Gunnison parents note work schedule challenges, childcare issues, unsupervised time for children, and after-school program limitations. This debate illustrates the economic disparity between the north and south ends of the Valley.

State of Behavioral Health

The county’s evolving demographic and socioeconomic trends lead to negative behavioral health outcomes. This section presents data from several sources and references community surveys conducted in 2023 and 2024 to gain insight on the state of behavioral health.

Stress

A 2023 widely distributed community survey identified the most-common causes of stress (Figure 3) (Gunnison County 2023). Forty-two percent of individuals cited **financial insecurity**, which corresponds to the share of residents living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard (Figure 1). Roughly one in four experience housing insecurity. One in five face food insecurity, which is significantly higher than the 10 to 15 percent pre-COVID level estimated for the 2022 State of the Community Report.

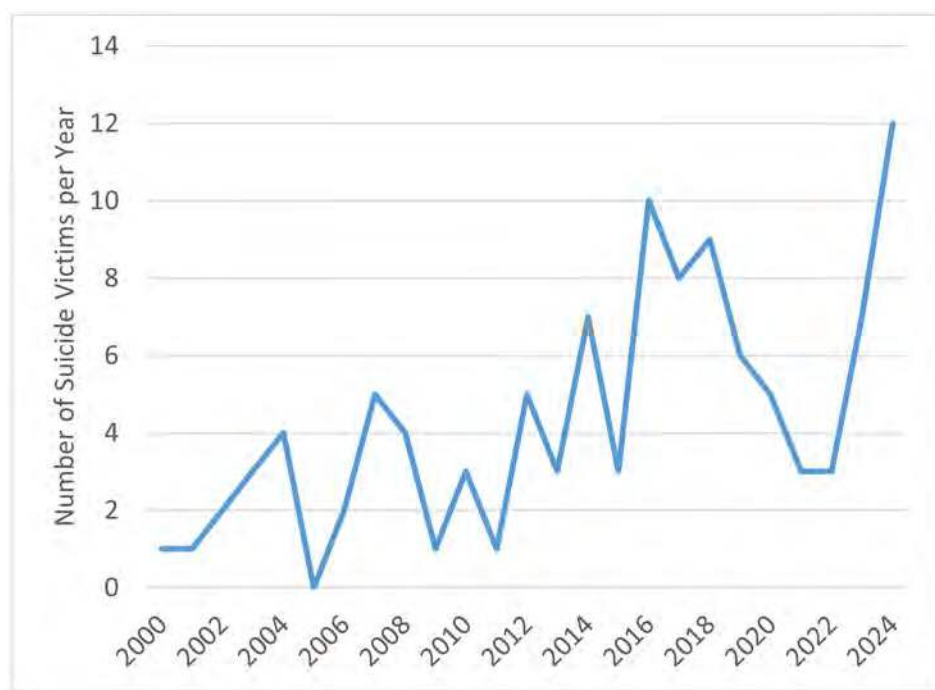


Source: Gunnison County Substance Abuse Prevention Project 2023 Community Survey.

Figure 3. Most-Common Causes of Stress

Suicide

In 2024, the number of suicides reached 12, up from 7 the previous year. In each year, 85 percent were male and 75 percent used a gun. Half of the victims were older than 52. CFGV interviews and survey respondents discussed how loss of hope was associated with **social isolation, economic insecurity, substance abuse, housing instability, hyper-individualized attitudes, and failure**. Figure 4 shows the annual number of suicide victims since 2000. The average annual growth rate of suicide over this period was 51 percent, significantly greater than the corresponding population growth rate of 1 percent. Gunnison County's suicide rate (approximately 35 per 100,000 people) is significantly higher than the state (21.1 per 100,000) and national (14 per 100,000) averages (CDC National Center for Health Statistics 2023).



Source: Gunnison County Coroner.

Figure 4. Annual Gunnison County Suicides from 2000 to 2024

Drug and Alcohol Prevalence

The prevalence of substance use disorders (SUD) and mental health illness were estimated for the 2022 study and updated for the current report using data from Porchlight Health (2023-2024), Gunnison Valley Health (GVH), Axis Health System, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (n.d.), and the Colorado Department of Public Safety (2025).

Current prevalence estimates with comparison to 2022 are shown in Table 3. The updated estimates suggest that 12 to 17 percent of the population may have alcohol use disorder, while drug use disorder is estimated at 10 to 14 percent. Combined, total SUD prevalence is estimated at 22 to 28 percent. Among individuals with SUD, 10 to 15 percent of the population may also experience co-occurring mental health challenges. The prevalence of these **behavioral health issues remains unchanged over the past 3 years** as substance abuse and mental illness have become persistent public health challenges.

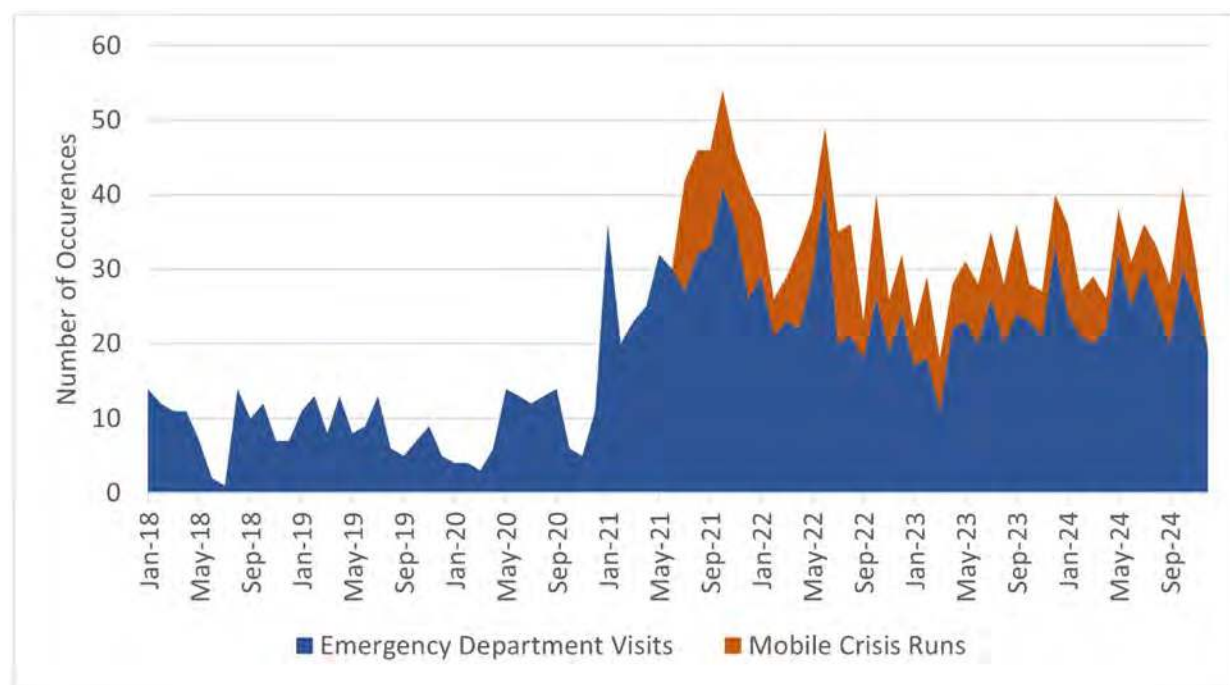
Table 3. Estimated Substance Use Disorders and Mental Health Illness

Category	(% of Population)	
	2022 SOTC	2025 SOTC
Alcohol Use Disorders (AUD)	10–20	12–17
Drug Use Disorders (DUD)	5–15	10–14
Total Substance Use Disorders (SUD) (AUD + DUD)	N/A	22–28
Co-Occurring Mental Health Illness (SUD + MH)	N/A	10–15
Mental Health Illnesses (MH)	15–20	15–20

Source: SOTC 2022, Porchlight Health, SAMHSA, Colorado Department of Public Safety.

Emergency Department Visits

While Gunnison County has increased behavioral health resources, the data suggests that behavioral health outcomes have not necessarily improved, as indicated by the **sustained high rate of emergency department (ED) visits for behavioral health following the pandemic** spike (Figure 5) (Gunnison Valley Health 2024). Note: behavioral health includes mental health issues (suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, etc.) and substance-use issues (overdose, intoxication, withdrawal, etc.). The introduction of Mobile Crisis services has likely diverted some individuals from the ED; without Mobile Crisis, ED visits would likely have been even higher.



Source: Gunnison Valley Health.

Figure 5. Monthly Emergency Department Visits and Mobile Crisis Calls

Socioeconomic Impacts on Behavioral Health

Respondents to the 2024 CFGV Survey were asked to comment on the stressors, self-sufficiency, and suicide charts shown above. Overall, the community explained that the **rising cost of living** compounds

feelings of isolation, loneliness, and (for some) suicide ideation. One interviewee shared their experience while living in the Valley, *"There are two points in my life where I had suicidal thoughts. One of them was when I was living here [9 years ago]. One factor for me feeling this way was that everything seemed so bleak: I kept feeling, 'This place is so stunningly beautiful, but I have no concept of the future, and if I can't be happy here, what hope is there?' I also worked manual jobs and service jobs. It is hard to see a future in the service industry when everyone is so invested in alcohol and drugs. I see old folks in that industry, and I don't want to be those people. Same with construction people; their body falls apart."*

Low wages, **limited career opportunities**, and an inability to achieve financial security are recurring themes. A resident observed, *"Gunnison is lovely, but it is not easy to live here. Many jobs are low-wage or not enough to thrive here."* Economic hardships are contributing to the increasing rate of suicide (Figure 4) as *"people lose all hope of being able to claw their way out of the bottom."*

Growing **economic precarity** leads to a focus on self-preservation—"if I do not look out for myself, no one will"—over community well-being. Tension arises between desires for self-reliance and the need for external support. Economic precarity limits a person's ability to invest in long-term goals. At the community level, it reduces economic mobility and resilience.

Chronic economic stress creates barriers to meaningful relationships. *"It's hard to build connections when you feel overwhelmed by external stressors. If you're always worried, it's hard to contribute to a meaningful connection with anyone—similarly, someone who is always struggling/stressed is taxing for the individuals they make connections with—thus creating an unintentionally isolating situation."*

In response to rising costs and declining real incomes, many residents work multiple jobs—1.2 per person on average—and/or work longer hours. **Time poverty** reduces opportunities to socialize and participate in civic activities. *"Some people are so focused on making money to make ends meet that they lack the time or willingness to connect with others."* As an example, it is increasingly difficult to find volunteer coaches for youth sports.

Cultural Impacts on Behavioral Health

When asked why almost half of Gunnison County residents reported experiencing some form of loneliness in the Crested Butte State of Mind's 2024 Engagement and Behavioral Health Survey, respondents highlighted many cultural contributors that negatively contributed to their mental health.

Friendships often depend on participation in outdoor recreation. Inability to participate diminishes social connections, leading to loneliness. As a resident observes, *"Physical health is interesting; it's like a currency here. If you can't ski or keep up, you're isolated or ostracized (unintentionally). Hard to connect with those who aren't physically active...[often it seems like you are] one injury away from being apart from your community."*

Personal struggles are often viewed as individual failures: *"The commitment of your friends is conditional, the ability to move up is limited...we live in a culture that implies it's your fault [if you aren't happy here or can't make it]...and the ultimate failure would be not to be able to make it here, cause if you can't make it here in paradise, well...you're not gonna be happy anywhere."*

The Valley attracts and celebrates individuals who embody independence and resilience, often referred to as "grit." However, **over-emphasis on self-reliance** can inadvertently hinder building relationships and seeking support. Beyond the typical reluctance to discuss mental health in Western culture, many residents remarked how they were hesitant to voice their struggles of living in Gunnison County, fearing they will be seen as lacking grit.

One participant reflected on the negative consequences of the cultural expectations of grit in Gunnison County: *"Yes, you have to be 'tough' and 'gritty' to live in Gunnison [County], but let's not perpetuate this*

to the extent that if people are dealing with problems, and they cannot deal with them on their own, that they are labeled not ‘tough’ enough. Some of the culture here perpetuates this, but really instead of bottling up emotions and dealing with them in destructive ways and habits, people should be able to find community release and support through their problems and adversities.” Indeed, Gunnison County has a deeply ingrained cultural identity of individual resiliency and grit essential for thriving in the Valley's challenging conditions.

In the Gunnison Valley, outdoor spaces and bars are primary gathering spaces. Even seemingly healthy pursuits like skiing and biking can become addictive when existing in a **culture of addiction**. The pursuit of adrenaline, status, or constant performance improvement can shift recreation into a single-minded pursuit, prioritizing temporary dopamine hits over lasting fulfillment. Socializing is centered around bars and drinking, thus, daily life often encourages addictive behavior and opportunities for non-substance community engagement are limited.

Underlying Forces of Change

Our population is growing faster than our housing supply, and costs are rising faster than incomes.

We, as a community, face tough choices to effectively respond to inevitable changes and avoid increasingly negative outcomes.

Many underlying forces impact the county's evolution, including growth of the national economy from the Great Recession, broadband expansion, development of sharing economy technology, retirement of Baby Boomers, and disproportionate reliance on Crested Butte Mountain Resort and WCU.

The undercurrents of change to the Valley are not unique. A recent study commissioned by the Northwest Colorado Council of Governments and the Colorado Association of Ski Towns documents the transition of mountain communities from predominately tourism-focused (prior to the pandemic) to a resident focus, with each town at a different point moving along this “continuum” (Insights Collective - The Travel Economy Think Tank 2024). Local author Roger Kahn documented a similar evolution of mountain and coastal communities starting as working-class resource-based economies, then becoming single-recreation towns, and finally becoming the year-round recreation exurbs (Kahn 2024).

The influx of wealth and outside investment has been a contributor to higher housing costs and widened economic disparities between affluent newcomers and locals struggling to afford basic needs. The proliferation of vacation homes and short-term rentals has increased the demand for local service workers without a concurrent increase in workforce housing.

The county's economy relies heavily on seasonal tourism and service industries. Lack of diversification means fewer opportunities for stable, year-round employment, perpetuating financial insecurity. Building more long-term affordable housing would support a more diverse county economy.

Housing Case Study

In the case of housing, **choosing to resist change and not acknowledge growth pushes the cost of housing up** as the number of people needing housing increases at a greater rate (1.02 percent) than the housing inventory (0.66 percent). We quantified this in the 2022 report. More recently, the 2024 Housing Needs Assessment estimated the housing “gap” (homes that would not be built by the free market given current policies and costs) was 1,064 units or 161 percent more units than 407-unit gap estimated for the 2016 needs assessment (Gunnison Valley Regional Housing Authority 2024) (Rees, Sullivan and Williford 2016). Therefore, we fall behind by an average of 82 units per year.

Unfortunately, **we cannot have more affordable housing without building more housing**; that is the difficult choice given inevitable change. The 2023 *One Valley Resiliency Roadmap* (Community Builders

2023) brought selected members of the community together to determine general goals for housing, land use, infrastructure, transportation, and civic capacity (Gunnison County n.d.). Indeed, housing was referenced 421 times in the 83-page document. Unfortunately, the Roadmap is not specific, with the concept of cost only mentioned 12 times and specific dollar amounts only referenced twice. Indeed, it is easy to agree that housing is a problem and much harder to make the tough choices to effectively address the problem.

The actual **cost of solving the housing problem is one of the trade-offs** that makes the choice to solve the problem difficult. A 2021 Region 10 study estimated the cost to construct Gunnison County's workforce housing needs to be \$430 million over 10 years (\$43 million per year). In terms of the needs assessment numbers above, if we assume an average size of 1,100 square feet and \$450 per square foot to build, the total cost of the 1,064 units would actually be \$527 million. Tackling this problem would take time, likely reduce resources available for other purposes, and change our communities by adding hundreds of new homes. However, housing is economic infrastructure needed to accommodate those working in the higher-paying jobs we desire. Residential developments, such as Gunnison County's Whetstone and Sawtooth Projects (a significant contribution), will help solve the housing crisis.

The challenge of addressing housing in Gunnison County goes beyond simply constructing more units—it is about **striking a balance between what gets built and who it serves**. Without intentional planning, new housing developments will cater to wealthier remote workers or second-home buyers rather than the local workforce struggling to afford a place to live. More and more, housing has become an issue of fairness and sustainability, requiring solutions that center residents who work and contribute to the community but are increasingly finding it nearly impossible to make ends meet. Building more housing also raises the questions of if and/or when and how the cycle of growth ends.

Alignment of Funding Priorities and Community Needs

Gunnison County is grappling with challenges stemming from the **interplay of policy decisions, structural inequalities, and cultural norms**. These dynamics shape resource allocation, economic opportunities, and social cohesion in ways that often exacerbate existing inequities. While the allure of Gunnison County remains strong for many, systemic barriers hinder the creation of a community that supports all residents equitably. Unintended consequences of zoning and building codes, while informed by important environmental and safety considerations, have inadvertently increased development costs, limiting the availability of affordable housing.

Funding priorities further highlight this dynamic. Resources are frequently directed toward initiatives that reflect the values of the community's more affluent segments. Programs that enhance cultural and environmental vitality have merit, and they are frequently recipients of larger and more visible philanthropic donations than programs serving urgent basic needs like affordable housing, food security, and access to mental health services.

In other examples, tens of millions of dollars are being spent to expand the Crested Butte Community School despite declining enrollment. Met Rec is considering an \$83 million north valley recreation center, while also considering the elimination of free, over-the-air television, a crucial service for some households. The threat of losing TV service was frequently mentioned in interviews conducted for this report and characterizes the financial strain experienced by those living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard. One resident explained it this way during the November board meeting's public comment period: "these are not trivial monthly expenses for many households in a valley with an increasingly high cost of living. Free over-the-air TV service is a valuable asset for the households that can't afford to spend hundreds of dollars for satellite TV, cable TV, or streaming services" (Reaman 2024).

This is not to say that education, recreation, and long-term planning are unimportant. Rather, the challenge lies in how we allocate limited resources in a way that balances the many needs of the

community. Funding decisions are often made in silos with little coordination between essential services and discretionary projects.

We hope readers of this report will not think that our challenges are insurmountable. Rather, like any household budget, we need to **understand how our limited resources are allocated**. Most public funds, including sales, lodging, and other sources of revenue are usually designated for specific purposes, making reallocation problematic. However, examples of reallocating public funds do exist. In 2019, the Gunnison County Commissioners directed significant portions of lodging tax revenue to be reallocated from tourism marketing to economic development and marketing support for WCU. In 2022, voters approved ballot measure 6A, allowing up to 40 percent of lodging tax revenue to be reallocated from tourism marketing, economic development, and WCU marketing support to workforce support, primarily housing and childcare, at the commissioners' discretion. The benefit of public funds is their relative stability in contrast to grant revenue, which disproportionately funds behavioral health and social services.

What is Working?

Survey respondents see Gunnison County moving in a positive direction through **community-led initiatives and growing inclusivity**—embracing diversity, mental health awareness, and destigmatization. Some mentioned cultural and social growth (expansion of arts and events), even if some were unaffordable. Active problem-solving was also highlighted (e.g., preservation of Mt. Emmons/Red Lady).

The Gunnison County community is actively addressing several pressing challenges through creative and collaborative approaches that foster connection, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability. Various community-driven initiatives are already making a significant impact. This section presents a selection of some of the impactful work taking place in the community.

Select Community Successes

Local research has produced tangible results. A study of WCU students by the associate director of student wellness found issues such as care-seeking stigma, housing instability, and limited counseling access. In response, WCU increased skilled staff and expanded behavioral health support. A GVH Aftercare Needs Assessment identified gaps in recovery services, which contributed to the establishment of Gunnison's first men's sober living home in 2024. A 2024 health study of the county's largest Hispanic subgroup, the Cora, underscored the need for culturally relevant care (Cooper and Fike 2024). As a result, GVH hired a Cora Health navigator and developed a strategic plan to help further understand the unique health needs of the Cora community and develop culturally-appropriate approaches and solutions. A Community Health Needs Assessment prioritized mental health and affordability concerns, prompting telehealth expansion (Gunnison Valley Health 2022). The assessment supported the integration of peer support specialists (people with lived experiences such as addiction and depression) in mobile crisis response.

In 2024, the GRASP Consortium and the Gunnison Valley Music Association hosted the **Almont Dance Series**, featuring 9 weeks of free dancing and live music over the summer. Dance styles included swing, two-step, waltz, polka, square dancing, and flatfooting. The event attracted diverse audiences, including families, seniors, and a dedicated group of young adults, fostering a sense of connection over consumption, as alcohol was not sold at or allowed in the venue. Attendance grew steadily, initially drawing 30 to 50 participants and later reaching over 100, particularly on polka and square dance nights.

In late winter 2024, the Gunnison community welcomed **Indigenous Healer Margarita Camarena** to host three impactful events: a Maya Fire Ceremony, a hands-on workshop on Zapotec Spiritual Cleanses,

and a community discussion on Indigenous healing practices. These events highlighted the importance of integrating ancestral wisdom, intentional gatherings, and gratitude into daily life to promote balance and collective well-being. The experience underscored the power of community collaboration and the need to continue cultivating spaces for cultural exchange and spiritual growth.

School-based clinicians embedded in the GWSD at each school site have provided **free mental health counseling**. The number of unique individuals served increased from 60 in 2021/22 to over 100 in 2023/24, representing over 3,800 individual sessions. This program is an extraordinary example of significantly increasing access to care, reducing stigma, and strengthening support for youth.

Through the GCCHC, a pilot program called **Gunnison County Cooperative Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** launched in 2024. Many small businesses are unable to offer workplace benefits such as health insurance and mental health services due to the high cost proportional to small staff sizes. EAP was created to support those local businesses to buy-in together to offer critical mental health services to employees. This program has assisted 14 different businesses from the service/hospitality, construction, and nonprofit industries, providing access to mental health services to 150 at-risk employees through their employers. Initial use rates are promising in the neighborhood of 5 percent and the program is expected to expand in the future.

The Welcoming and Belonging Health Coalition Subgroup, complementing the Gunnison Cultural Connection's immigrant inclusion planning, centers its efforts around the Welcoming America Initiative by promoting belonging—particularly for newcomers, immigrants, and youth. The subgroup first created an educational brochure outlining welcoming tips by securing funding from a marketing grant to design and develop the brochure in Spanish and English. The brochure has been distributed widely across the community.

CB State of Mind (CBSOM) is a grassroots nonprofit organization committed to reducing the Valley's high suicide rate. CBSOM's work includes decreasing stigma and expanding access. CBSOM's event lineup is a central hub for free community events aimed at building substance-free personal connection and community support in an effort to reduce isolation. Program data shows 98 percent of participants report improved mental wellness.

Brothers Helping Brothers (BHB) was founded in early 2024 to address the alarming trend of men's mental health challenges. Partnering with CBSOM, BHB focuses on raising funds for suicide prevention, hosting male-centered activities, and combating the stigma around mental health by engaging local businesses and the community. Mental health delivery includes group support, such as support from people with similar backgrounds or work in similar industries and peer support. BHB exemplifies why increasing access to therapists is not enough, as differing modes of mental health delivery are needed.

Best Practices from Other Communities

In Montrose, Colorado, the Village at San Juan pairs young adults (ages 18–24) who were in foster care and have 'aged out' with older adults, creating a dynamic of mentorship and mutual support. This **intergenerational and mixed-income housing** model reduces isolation and strengthens community ties through shared spaces such as kitchens, gardens, and lounges, where residents can interact and build relationships.

In Ouray, Colorado, Rural Homes and Bright Futures are developing a housing model that combines **affordable homes with essential childcare**. As part of the Waterview development, Rural Homes is building two units designed for state-licensed in-home childcare. Bright Futures supports this effort by training residents to become licensed childcare providers, ensuring families have housing, entrepreneurial opportunities, and access to reliable, community-based childcare.

Communities have embraced collective **time-saving systems** to reduce individual workloads. In Ithaca, New York, the Ithaca Hours system allows residents to exchange services without money, fostering reciprocity. Brooklyn's Solidarity Networks share resources, such as childcare and transportation.

Participatory budgeting ensures that policy and funding decisions reflect the community's needs. In Porto Alegre, Brazil, and New York City, residents decide how public funds are spent, prioritizing projects like affordable housing and mental health services. This approach ensures that local government actions align with the needs of underserved populations.

Some communities combat hyper-individualism by creating spaces that **encourage non-transactional relationships**. In Detroit, Michigan, the Cass Community Social Services organization provides communal spaces where residents gather for meals, workshops, and health screenings. The Transition Town movement in the United Kingdom fosters community resilience through shared gardening, education, and storytelling.

To address the culture of addiction, communities are creating **non-commercial recreational spaces**. The Sober Curious Movement organizes alcohol-free social events, such as dance parties and wellness workshops.

Local taxes and fees can offer sources of funding for critical community needs like affordable or workforce housing. In Jackson Hole, Wyoming, second-home owners pay fees to support affordable housing. This fosters a sense of responsibility for the community, ensuring that everyone contributes to its sustainability.

Recommendations

Respondents to the 2024 CFGV community survey consistently suggest **strengthening social connections, creating genuinely affordable housing, and improving access to mental health care** as primary solutions to local challenges like loneliness, economic stress, and suicide. Underlying all these ideas is a **desire for an inclusive culture** that values community engagement, mutual aid, and ongoing innovation to meet evolving needs.

Demand for public health, healthcare, and basic-needs services are constantly increasing within the community. Efforts to **address the upstream causes** have been minimal compared to the resources dedicated to crisis interventions. Wildfire suppression is the perfect analogy, with significantly more resources dedicated to putting out extreme fires than preventing them from occurring in the first place.

Expand Opportunities for Community Engagement

Organizations and individuals are doing a great job of creating **opportunities for people to connect**. Creating even more opportunities for residents to connect in welcoming, non-alcohol-centered environments will further cultivate social capital. Social capital refers to the networks, trust, and relationships that form when people collaborate and support one another, which strengthens the fabric of the community and enhances its ability to make choices and manage change.

Expanding free and low-cost activities like community dances, music events, and outdoor gatherings, as well as **developing third spaces** (spaces that aren't one's home or workplace, and are relatively low-cost), can help combat isolation. Promoting intergenerational events and pedestrian-friendly activities will encourage spontaneous interactions, enhancing community spirit and support. One respondent advocated for *"More one-on-one ways that don't cost money, i.e., game night, or puzzle works at libraries, the free dances, places for people to gather and actually talk with others."* In this way, people will see each other as neighbors rather than strangers.

Promoting social awareness can be achieved by **sponsoring community-driven cultural events and educational programs**. Encouraging cultural exchange through arts initiatives and community celebrations will help bridge divides and foster trust among residents. Developing spaces that prioritize shared experiences and mutual respect will create a more welcoming environment for all. The Valley's agricultural heritage can be celebrated and utilized to build social capital through 4-H, CSU Extension programming, and food source activities.

Expanding mental health services should **focus on accessibility and community integration**. This can include increasing the availability of peer support networks and group counseling, as well as creating more inclusive spaces for mental health care. Continuing the efforts of the GCCHC will ensure that services continue to be provided for a diverse group of individuals across the county. Funding remains a challenge. School facilities are expanding, new EMS stations are being constructed, public transit is growing, and other public assets are being developed as a result of leadership pursuing funding.

Survey respondents highlighted the importance of **volunteer initiatives** that foster stewardship and belonging, alongside youth engagement programs in mentorship, sports, and the arts. Volunteerism benefits communities in many ways. A big challenge is that many people have less time to volunteer in part due to so many living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard. New models for supporting community involvement and civic responsibility—such as cooperative models and stipends—need to be explored.

Finally, survey respondents identified the need for **improved outreach** to effectively communicate all the events and opportunities. Today there are many different ways to reach people (e.g., flyers, email, social media), and communicating is a never-ending task. Centralized calendars or social media accounts listing all community events in one place are great ideas but require a lot of work to manage and are not successful without a high threshold of participation. Targeted outreach to isolated populations such as seniors, newcomers, and non-English speakers will be required. Over the past decade, the share of Hispanic residents increased by 35 percent, from 7 percent in 2010 to 10 percent in 2023. At this rate, one in five residents will be Hispanic by 2050.

Local churches, city and county programs, GVH, and community organizations have played a vital role in supporting vulnerable populations and behavioral health efforts. Gunnison Cultural Connection, initiated by Hispanic community leaders, cultivated welcoming events to help newcomers integrate. Bethany Baptist provided financial support for Gunnison's first men's sober living home, while We Care Gunny, a church-led initiative, addresses rising suicide rates through spiritual support. Gunnison Congregational Church, now home to Juntos Por Gunnison, the Congregational Church of Christ, and St. Peter's Catholic Church have contributed to immigrant support, interpretation services, and culturally responsive care, marking significant progress since the original State of the Community report.

Economic Solutions

The recent collaboration between the Rady School of Computer Science & Engineering and the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL) is a model example of a partnership that will create higher-paying scientific research jobs, thereby contributing to a more stable and diverse economy (provided more housing is built to avoid increasing housing costs for existing community members). This partnership symbolizes the "One Valley" vision, with an organization located at either end of the Valley.

Efforts to "grow our own" workforce are crucial to strengthening the Gunnison County community, particularly given the housing challenges that make it difficult to attract new residents. The GVH/WCU partnership has added a nursing degree. WCU and Western Colorado Area Health Education Center also plan to provide subsidized Community Health Worker credentialing to local residents. Similarly, the Pathways Program at GWSD schools has broadened its focus on trade skills, offering hands-on internships and shadowing opportunities to prepare students for local careers. These initiatives provide

meaningful career advancement and skill-building opportunities within the existing community, ensuring long-term sustainability and workforce development.

The 2024 CFGV survey showed WCU introduced many residents to the community for the first time. One noted, *"I attended WCU and graduated in the class of '77. I came back to teach skiing '83–'87. I returned again after retiring in 2019. I now live here full-time."* WCU itself is an economic driver and cultural asset. A recent economic impact report failed to show the university's impact in the context of the county economy and whether the impact is growing or shrinking over a meaningful time period, both of which would be helpful to understand (Leeds School of Business, University of Colorado, Boulder 2024).

Gunnison County's Tourism and Prosperity Partnership (TAPP) focuses on economic diversification and resiliency by cultivating entrepreneurs, developing export manufacturers, attracting capital, and reducing frictions associated with a company's ability to scale. The best way to increase wages is to produce higher-value goods and services for export. This exchange increases the flow of money into the county, building wealth and increasing resources available for capital investment, thus perpetuating an upward cycle. Production of higher-value goods and services will require workforce training and importing skilled labor, which requires housing. The theme here is change. Many residents want higher-paying jobs, less seasonality, and greater diversification—all of which will change the community.

The City of Gunnison is undertaking an economic development plan. The effort is a response to empty store fronts on Main Street and a "stagnant" economy (Biondini 2024). The plan intends to leverage partnerships with other organizations such as GVH, WCU, and many others. Best practices from other communities facing similar challenges will be considered along with economic incentives. Creative solutions for significant opportunities (e.g., the stalled Gunnison Rising project) need to be developed.

As the ski industry across the country has invested billions of dollars in upgrades and improvements, a dearth of investment for several decades has contributed to Crested Butte Mountain Resort's transition to a regional drive market resort. Future investment would improve the resort's competitive position and should improve opportunities for local workers within the county's dominant tourism sector, provided housing inventory increases at the same rate as job creation.

Conclusion

Financial stress and cultural norms are increasingly contributing to poor behavioral health. Examples of successful programs and events to strengthen connection and belonging are found throughout the community. We need more of them to improve behavioral health, and we need to more fully integrate them into all aspects of community life—from designing housing that encourages gathering to ensuring there are intentional community events that aim to nurture relationships.

Resiliency has always been essential to living in Gunnison County, but true resilience cannot exist without addressing the broader challenges facing the community. We cannot ask individuals to be resilient without also ensuring that the community itself is strong, supportive, and capable of sustaining its members. Thriving requires more than personal grit—it depends on spaces where people can rest, heal, and find purpose, supported by deep connections and collective responsibility. Indigenous Healer Margarita Camarena reflected on this after leading the Maya Fire Ceremony: "The fire validated the strength and connection of the community. It showed that there is a group of people who are committed to creating events and situations to continue to strengthen the spirit of community, yet the fire says more people need to be involved." We must consider how the Valley can foster deeper engagement and more meaningful opportunities for individual and community resilience to grow.

The 2024 CFGV Survey and interviews reinforce that we all want more affordable housing, higher wages, expanded recreation, and growth that does not adversely impact the environment nor heritage of the

Gunnison Valley. Everyone wants change for the better. However, more affordable housing means more housing, which would change community landscapes. Higher wages may mean new jobs and new residents. “One Valley” projects affirm collective aspirations. Achieving consensus is easy, yet studies alone are not enough because they do not represent choices.

The distribution of public revenue deserves more dialogue from a high-level perspective. On the ground, sales tax and property tax ballot measures occasionally pass. As a community, we can do more to evaluate the allocation of public revenue relative to our most severe challenges and the needs of residents living below the Self-Sufficiency Standard. Future research should examine how socioeconomic disparities impact different subgroups (e.g., Hispanic, low income, elderly) and develop solutions that consider these groups’ unique needs.

The future will not be the past and it is ours to shape. Longtime mountain prognosticator Myles Rademan defined nostalgia as *“yearning for a time that never was, while avoiding the future that seems inevitable”* (Rademan 2015). We do not need to abandon the landscapes and lifestyles that brought us here, but we must expand our vision of community and how we engage within it.

Our small population of 17,300 residents will not be able to produce the resources necessary to satisfy all of our wants. Even if we did satisfy all of our wants, more people would desire to live here, creating an endless cycle that we do not know how to stop. On the other hand, if current trends continue with the population growing faster than housing and costs rising faster than incomes, quality of life for many will get worse. There is simply no moral or legal right to an unchanging community. Shaping a better future comes down to making hard choices about how best to allocate limited resources, intentionally building community, and accepting the resulting changes.

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John Powell grew up in Gunnison and is currently working for Gunnison County as the Data and Communications Coordinator. He graduated from Western Colorado University (WCU) in 2016 with a double major in math and sociology. His interest in data analytics started during his time at WCU where he learned about the usefulness of combining math and sociology to provide insight into the world. While at WCU he gained knowledge and experience in survey writing, data collecting, data analysis, and data visualization. John has traveled around many parts of Asia and spent a year teaching English before returning to Gunnison to start working. John is currently working on a Master's of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley.

Cole Cooper recently earned a Master's of Behavioral Science degree, with a focus on rural community health. His master's project centered on facilitating community dialogues to better understand the health-care beliefs and needs of the Indigenous Cora community. Cole serves as the Principal of Desert Spring Health Consulting, where he continues to collaboratively champion health-care equity initiatives with the Cora community while also engaging in broader health-related research and consultation projects. Recently, he was awarded a year-long contract to co-facilitate the Southwest Colorado Opioid Regional Council. In this role, he oversees and supports various cross-county projects addressing substance use, prevention, harm reduction, treatment, and recovery support. In addition to his consulting work, Cole is a professor at WCU, where he teaches a self-designed upper-level sociology course, "Depressions, Addictions, and Community Health."

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Recent projects include determining the economic impacts of numerous utility-scale energy and transmission projects across the west, creating an economic model for the Aspen School District, conducting a six-county housing market study in western Colorado, developing a model of Lake Tahoe Basin's tourist economy for sustainability planning, preparing a large-scale economic development plan within the Navajo Nation, and modeling the "water economies" of several counties in Idaho. Jeff has served as an expert witness before the Idaho Department of Water Resources Court and was recently appointed to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget's Advisory Board. Jeff earned his master's degree in Econometrics and a doctorate in Applied Statistics at the University of Washington, Seattle. For more information visit www.tpsconsulting.net.

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