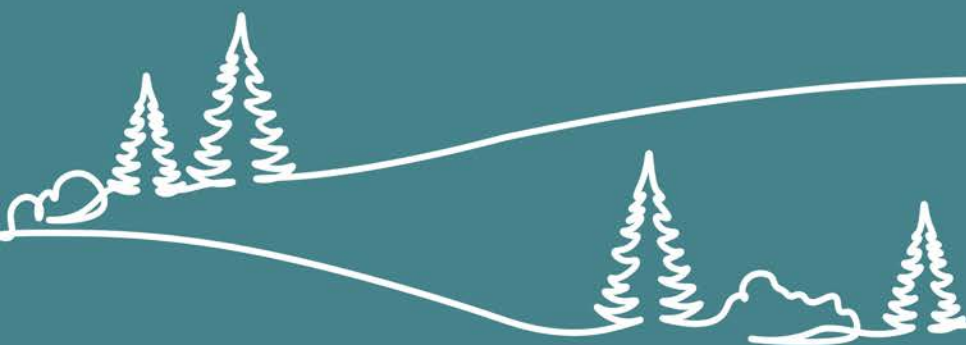


May 2025



THE GUNNISON ADVANTAGE: PEOPLE, PLACE, OPPORTUNITY

Economic Development Strategic Plan for the City of Gunnison



About this Work

TIP Strategies, Inc., was engaged by the City of Gunnison, Colorado, in September 2024 to prepare an economic development strategic plan. *The Gunnison Advantage: People, Place, Opportunity* is the culmination of this work. It is supplemented by two separate deliverables: an in-depth quantitative and geospatial analysis provided to the City of Gunnison in early 2025 as an interactive data visualization in Tableau and an Excel-based matrix to guide the plan's implementation.

We would like to thank the staff of the City of Gunnison for providing guidance and feedback that shaped this plan. TIP is also grateful to the many residents and business owners in Gunnison who shared their thoughts and contributed insights during the process.



Gunnison, Colorado is a small mountain community on the state's western slope with a population of approximately 6,560 full-time residents. The City of Gunnison is the county seat for Gunnison

County. Gunnison has a rich history of ranching, agriculture, mining, tourism and outdoor recreation opportunities that bring many more people through the community.

Contact

201 W Virginia Ave
Gunnison, CO 81230
PH: +1 970 6418080
<https://www.gunnisonco.gov/>

Project Team

Amanda Wilson, City Manager
Anton Sinkewich, Community Development Director
Ricardo Esqueda, Community and Policy Liaison



TIP Strategies, Inc., is a privately held Austin-based firm providing consulting and advisory services to public and private sector clients. Established in 1995, the firm has spent 30 years partnering with communities, turning insights into strategies that shape tomorrow. Its core competencies are strategic planning for economic development, talent strategies, organizational development, resiliency planning, and equity initiatives.

Contact

TIP Strategies
13492 N Hwy 183, Suite 120-254, Austin, TX 78750
PH: +1 512 3439113
www.tipstrategies.com

Project Contributors

Jon Roberts, Managing Partner
Jenn Todd-Goynes, CNU-A, Senior Consultant

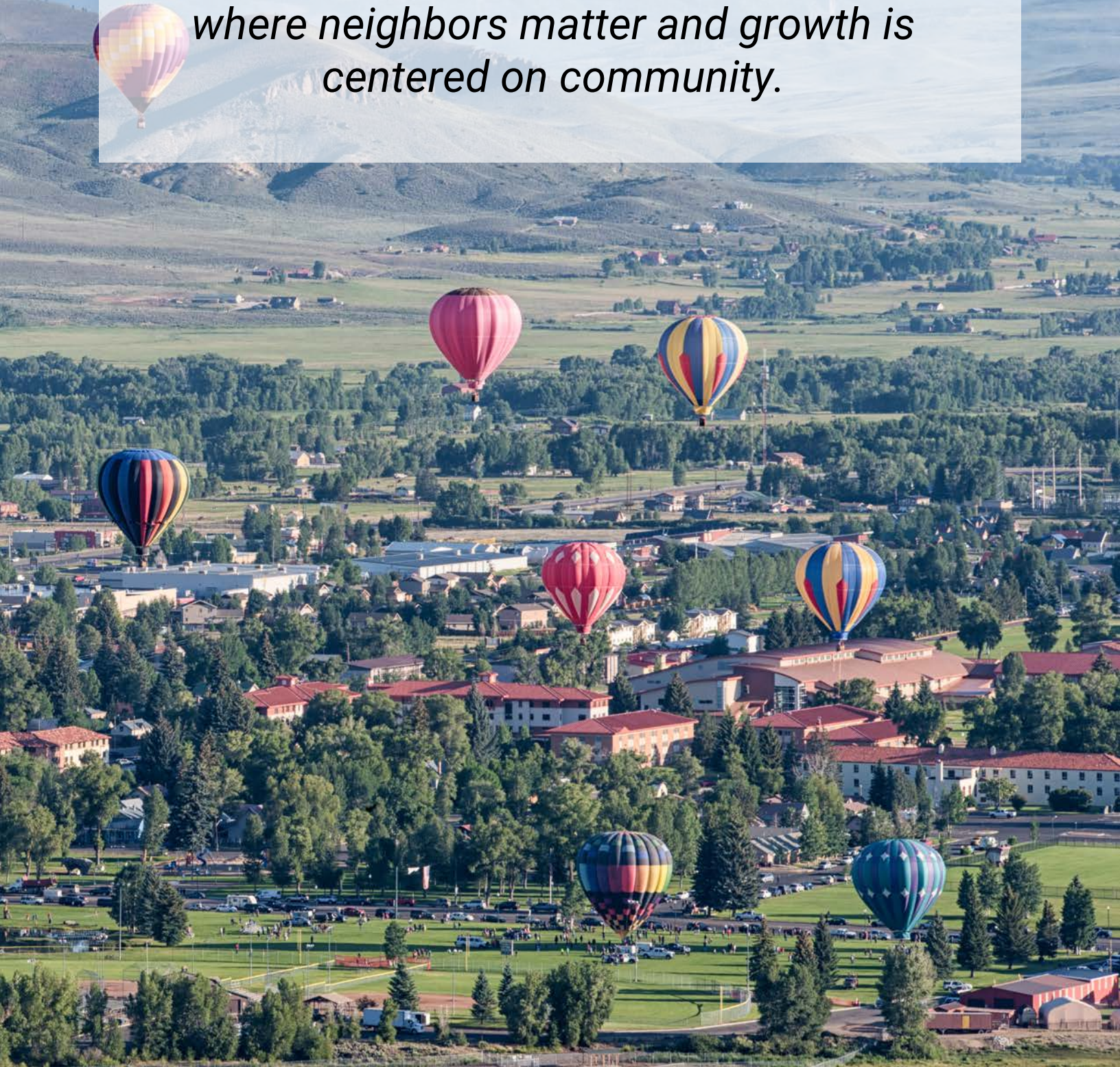
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Plan Vision

*Gunnison is the last great mountain town,
where neighbors matter and growth is
centered on community.*



Why Plan? Why Now?



BACKGROUND

The City of Gunnison (the City), located in west-central Colorado, is a gateway to the greater Gunnison Valley and the nearby towns of Crested Butte, Mount Crested Butte, and Crested Butte South. It is a place where natural beauty, world-class recreation, innovative companies, and a strong sense of community converge, creating a vibrant economy and a welcoming place for residents and visitors. Historically, Gunnison has been a stable community with moderate population and economic growth. It acts as a hub for valley communities through the ebb and flow of the tourism season and is unique among Colorado mountain towns. Gunnison is known for its exceptionally remote location and cold weather, earning the town an informal designation as the icebox of Colorado. It is a place where long-term residents outnumber tourists, maintaining a low unemployment rate with high rates of housing occupancy.

Gunnison's approach to slow but steady growth has worked in the past, supported by a growing job market and established economic anchors such as Western Colorado University, Gunnison Valley Health, and the Gunnison Crested Butte Regional Airport. However, the community is approaching an inflection point. Housing has become less accessible and affordable, tax revenues have slowed, infrastructure needs have grown, and increasing vacancies downtown present challenges. The City is balancing relatively flat revenue trends over the past several years with increasing costs, which impacts the City's ability to provide essential services. For recent context, sales tax revenues increased just over 1 percent from 2023–2024, while the rate of inflation during that same time was approximately 3 percent. **Resolving this widening gap between revenues and expenses, and mitigating its impact on taxpayers, requires a strategy that leads to growth and revenue diversification.**

Before embarking on a planning process, the Gunnison City Council and organizational leadership developed a strategic framework. This framework includes economic prosperity as one of five imperatives alongside housing affordability, infrastructure resilience, organizational performance, and public engagement. The discussions during the creation of the Council's framework were the impetus for an economic strategy to guide growth.

This economic development strategic plan outlines a bold vision for Gunnison's next five years, one that harnesses its unique assets to create a more diversified, resilient economy—an economy that serves residents, business owners, and visitors.



The community already has several key anchors in place that can contribute to this objective, described in detail in Figure 1. Western Colorado University is a major economic engine, bringing professors, students, and visitors to town, in addition to hosting ICELab, a local coworking and innovation space. Gunnison is home to the region's airport, and benefits from the marketing initiatives and data collection efforts of the regional Tourism and Prosperity Partnership (TAPP). The employment opportunities and access to community healthcare afforded by Gunnison Valley Health (GVH) give the community a distinct advantage. By leveraging these anchors under the umbrella of a coordinated strategic plan and making targeted investments in placemaking, the outdoor recreation economy, and science and technology, Gunnison can become a place where quality of life and economic opportunity thrive.

Figure 1. Selected Anchor Institutions Impacting Gunnison's Economy

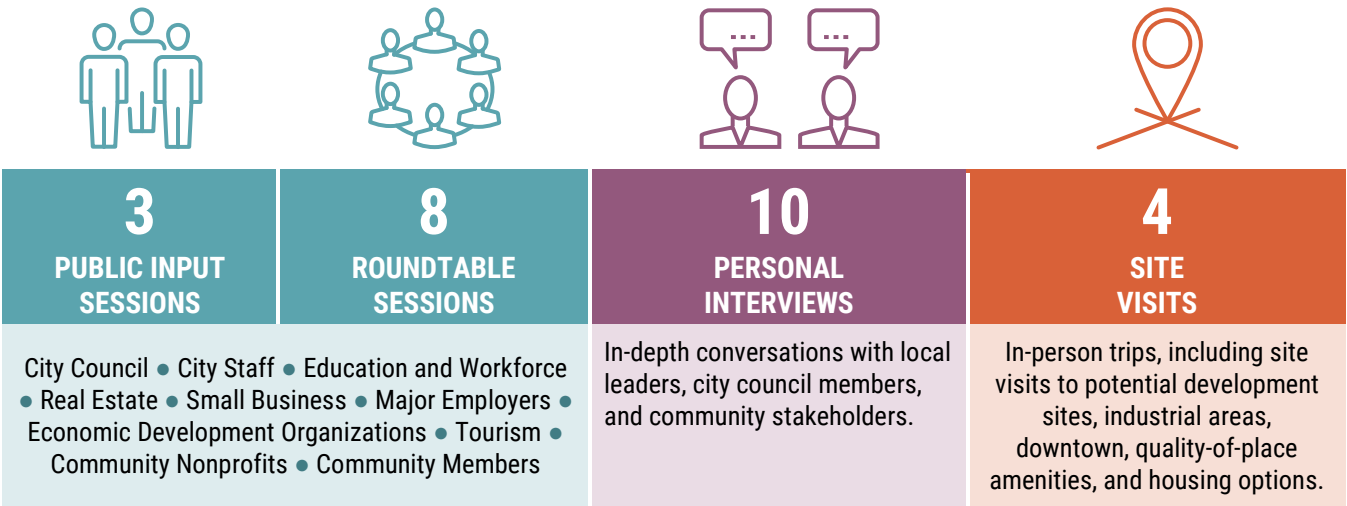
| ORGANIZATION | IMPACT TO THE CITY OF GUNNISON'S ECONOMY |
|---|--|
| CITY OF GUNNISON | Led by City Council, the City of Gunnison staff work to grow a community where education, entrepreneurship, and the outdoors converge, creating a vibrant economy and welcoming place. The City is responsible for building and maintaining infrastructure (e.g., water, sewer, roads); carrying out land use and planning initiatives; managing local tax revenues; and leveraging partnerships to benefit the residents, workers, and visitors in Gunnison. |
| GUNNISON COUNTRY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE | The Gunnison Country Chamber is a membership-based organization that is also funded by the City of Gunnison. The Chamber operates the Visitor Center, offers networking opportunities for members, collaborates on small business learning opportunities, and celebrates members on social media. This organization is the lead for small business promotion and support. |
| GUNNISON COUNTY | Gunnison County and the City of Gunnison cooperate on the Gunnison Area Plan (GAP), which encourages development in areas that are best suited for growth due to existing infrastructure, services, and the potential to support livable, community-oriented neighborhoods. Gunnison County is also a significant landowner in the City of Gunnison. |
| GUNNISON VALLEY HEALTH | GVH is the second largest employer in the county, with more than 400 employees. In addition to providing healthcare services, GVH spearheads a regular Community Health Needs Assessment to identify gaps in the healthcare ecosystem and develop a plan to address them. |
| TOURISM AND PROSPERITY PARTNERSHIP | TAPP leverages Local Marketing District and grant monies to grow overnight lodging revenues in the valley. The organization works to diversify the regional economy through leadership on the Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation Committee, support for Western Colorado University, and the creation of entrepreneurial opportunities such as ICELab. TAPP runs seasonal marketing campaigns and hosts a website with information about local attractions and visitation data trends, such as airline passenger trends and tax data. |
| GUNNISON WATERSHED SCHOOL DISTRICT | The Gunnison Watershed School District has seven schools with a total of more than two thousand students, including Gunnison Elementary School, Gunnison Middle School, Gunnison High School, and Lake Preschool and Kindergarten. The school district is a major employer and the first line of student preparedness for the workforce, providing educational skills, tools, and exposure to career opportunities for students. The school district is also a significant landowner in the City of Gunnison. |
| WESTERN COLORADO UNIVERSITY | According to their 2021-2023 Economic Impact Report , Western Colorado University generated \$153.4 million of economic impact in Gunnison County. The university employs more than 1,000 people who facilitate the educational experience of over 3,000 undergraduate, non-degree, concurrent, and graduate students. Western Colorado's economic impact extends to include visitors to the university who spend a collective \$7 million annually, to the degree programs that prepare students for local employment opportunities, and to their collaboration with TAPP on ICELab, an entrepreneurial support organization. |

Source: Compiled by TIP Strategies, Inc.

PROJECT APPROACH

The City of Gunnison and TIP Strategies, Inc., (TIP) launched an economic strategic planning process in fall 2024. The project began with a review of existing local and regional plans, along with a review of available data from local economic development and planning organizations. This review was supplemented by stakeholder engagement to gather insights from the community and leaders in industry, small business, government, real estate, higher education, and workforce. This process, shown in Figure 2, included a public input session in addition to virtual and in-person roundtables and interviews with dozens of private and public sector stakeholders.

Figure 2. Stakeholder Engagement Overview



Information from the background data review and stakeholder engagement process was combined with an in-depth data analysis focused on socioeconomic and demographic trends, strategic growth areas, and land use to inform the vision, strategic initiatives, and actions in this plan. The complete data analysis was delivered separately as an interactive data visualization. Insights from the analysis are described in the Planning Context section.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

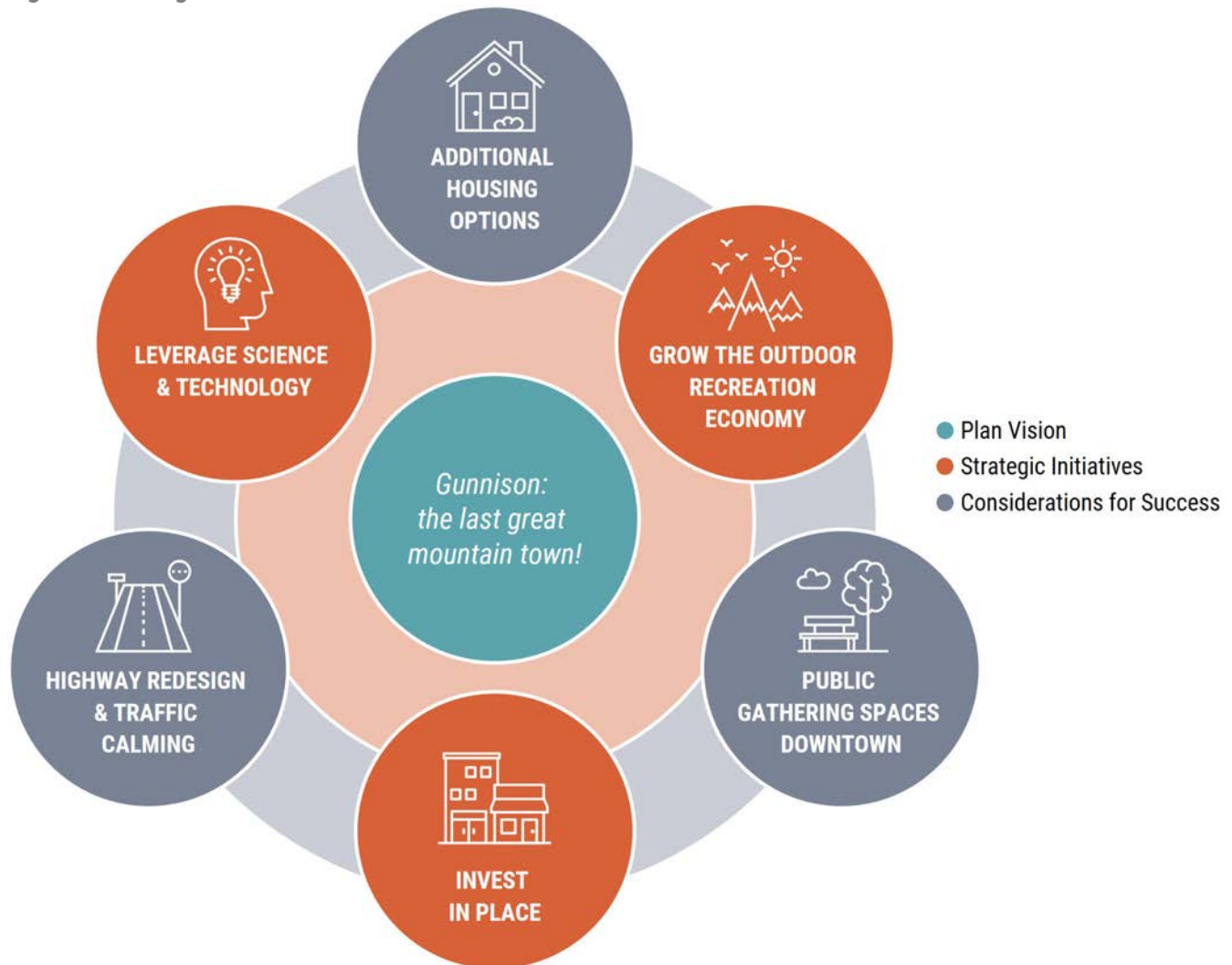
The *Gunnison Advantage* strategic framework (Figure 3, page 5) illustrates the priorities, opportunity areas, and values identified during the planning process. This plan is guided by a vision statement, which informs the three strategic initiatives: invest in place, grow the outdoor recreation economy, and leverage science and technology.

- **Invest in place.** This initiative focuses on downtown development and redevelopment, to include a retail strategy, infrastructure expansion, and land assembly outside the downtown.
- **Grow the outdoor recreation economy.** This approach has several components: support entrepreneurial activity related to outdoor equipment, actively recruit companies focused on new product development, and formalize an events strategy that boosts tourist activity from outside communities while supporting the local workforce as well as outdoor recreation manufacturers and suppliers. In addition, this initiative focuses on new lodging availability.
- **Leverage science and technology.** This initiative creates connections between programs and assets at Western Colorado University, entrepreneurs, and Gunnison’s unique geographic location to foster innovation and economic growth.

The success of these initiatives is predicated on the following considerations.

- **Additional housing options.** The median home value in Gunnison is \$408,600, which is unaffordable to much of the workforce. Nearly 40 percent of current renters and homeowners are cost-burdened (spending more than 30 percent of monthly income on housing), and fewer than 1,500 people both live and work in Gunnison. Building additional housing that is attainable for the local workforce is critical for maintaining a sense of community and facilitating future growth and should be part of any catalytic real estate project.
- **Highway redesign and traffic calming.** The intersection of two major highways bisecting the downtown is a barrier to future development. Multiple high-speed lanes make it perilous for pedestrians to shop or sightsee. A lack of visual cues makes it difficult for drivers to realize they are in a downtown area or to orient themselves to shops and activities. In short, visitors and residents encounter a hostile environment where fast traffic is in proximity and street crossings are sparse.
- **Public gathering spaces downtown.** Currently, downtown offers few “sticky” areas—places that give people a reason to visit and to stay. A public gathering space would increase the visual activity downtown, making the area more appealing for spending time, which benefits nearby businesses and increases community connections.

Figure 3. Strategic Framework



Gunnison's quality of life, outdoor amenities, anchor institutions, and engaged community provide a strong foundation for the future. However, Gunnison is also at the moment where a more deliberate and strategic approach to sustained, long-term economic prosperity is needed. This plan was created as a customized tool to guide investment and growth in Gunnison. The overarching goal is to create a more vibrant local economy. Currently, the City of Gunnison does not have full-time economic development staff or an independent organization that is charged with guiding the city's economic growth. This contrasts with growing mountain towns such as Salida, Montrose, and Ouray that have dedicated economic development organizations.

Implementing the strategic initiatives and actions in this plan will require interorganizational cooperation and commitment from leaders in local government, the Chamber, TAPP, the private sector, and nonprofits who are leading contributors to the local economy. Individually and collectively, these organizations have a significant impact on Gunnison's economic health. However, there is a gap between the core mission of these organizations and Gunnison's economic development goals. A new public-private economic development partnership is essential to closing that gap. This partnership can take the lead on economic development initiatives with the assistance and participation of the organizations described in Figure 1 (page 3).

The City of Gunnison would be the founding champion of this partnership, funding a chief executive officer. At full build-out, the partnership would add staff to implement initiatives in business retention and expansion; a staff lead for recruitment and marketing; and a board of directors with representatives from key Gunnison anchor institutions such as the City, Chamber of Commerce, Western Colorado University, Gunnison Valley Health, and others.



Strategic Initiatives



GOAL 1. INVEST IN PLACE

Prioritize place-based initiatives that support a more vibrant, resilient economy.

Gunnison offers residents a high quality of life and a strong sense of community surrounded by a beautiful natural environment. Additional investments downtown are needed to create an anchor for the community and a place where residents, workers, students, and visitors can interact. Stakeholders highlighted the need to create a more welcoming environment by mitigating the negative impacts of two state highways intersecting downtown, supporting existing small businesses, addressing vacancies, and creating more “third places” where people can connect with others outside their homes and workplaces.

Investments in placemaking, coupled with infrastructure expansion and real estate strategies, will help attract new businesses and industries to Gunnison. New development can grow a larger and more sustainable local tax base, offer additional employment opportunities, and position the community for transformative initiatives, such as a medical innovation district.

Strategies and Actions

1.1. Support downtown redevelopment and development.

1.1.1. Develop a retail strategy that supports small businesses and reduces vacancies downtown.

- Install wayfinding, signage, and other place-based indicators to better identify parking, businesses, and other key assets in partnership with organizations such as the Gunnison Creative District.
- Coordinate with TAPP, the chamber, and Visit Crested Butte to market local businesses to visitors and residents. Ensure that local businesses are aware of major events happening locally and within the region, and that they have the opportunity to be part of related marketing efforts.
- Develop a small business succession program that connects Gunnison residents and Western Colorado University students with small business owners who want to exit their businesses.
- Work with ICELab and other partners to establish a business incubator and coworking space downtown.

1.1.2. Create improved gateways on Highways 50 and 135.

- Host a design competition focused on roadway improvements that create a better environment for businesses, visitors, and residents.
- Install temporary traffic calming measures such as planters and curb extensions at intersections or crosswalks (bulb-outs) to slow traffic and facilitate a more welcoming pedestrian experience.
- Utilize permanent installations, such as a median and more frequent crosswalks, to create a more comfortable and safer environment for pedestrians.

1.1.3. Establish public gathering spaces that serve as a “third place.”

- Maximize opportunities for the temporary activation of underutilized spaces such as parks, parking lots, vacant storefronts, and special events to bring people downtown. Consider both indoor, covered, and outdoor spaces to facilitate year-round use.
- Identify potential sites for investment in permanent public gathering spaces that consider public input, comprehensive plan direction, accessibility, and ability to generate spillover activity.
- Coordinate with Western Colorado University to market events and create stronger connections between students and downtown.

1.2. Expand connectivity and accessibility for infrastructure networks.

1.2.1. Increase housing availability and affordability.

- Establish public-private partnerships with anchor employers such as the university and the hospital to build workforce housing.
- Support nontraditional housing types to increase housing availability.
- Levy a City of Gunnison lodging tax on hotel, motel, and short-term stays (example: Airbnb and Vrbo) to fund workforce housing efforts. According to TAPP data, the county lodging tax has steadily grown since 2018, and local lodging taxes in Crested Butte and Mt. Crested Butte have generated significant revenue.
- Explore the feasibility of offering tax credits or rebates that incentivize property owners to convert short-term rental properties to long-term rentals for locals. This tool can also be used to encourage new developments to include long-term rentals.

1.2.2. Increase broadband access throughout the city.

- Ensure broadband networks are included in major development plans.
- Connect broadband expansion to business and entrepreneur attraction efforts.

1.2.3. Bolster water and electric infrastructure.

- Implement drinking water system improvements, in coordination with the city's strategic framework, to diversify water supply and ensure long-term service.
- Evaluate utility rates to create alignment with market rates and service needs.
- Coordinate infrastructure expansion with new developments that bring high-priority products such as housing.



- 1.3. In support of an active economy year-round, create an events strategy supported by the private sector that serves the local population and brings in visitors from outside of Gunnison.
 - 1.3.1. Launch events in coordination with regional partners that are aligned with competitive advantages in location and industry, such as outdoor equipment products and hands-on testing; environmental science; sustainable energy; and cold, high-altitude environments.
 - Ensure mutual promotion and complementary scheduling across geographies and lead organizations.
 - Identify opportunities to create symbiotic events that benefit multiple locations within the region. Example events include a multiday bike event that takes place in Gunnison and Crested Butte; a multilocation outdoor innovation, technology, and gear expo; or a winter festival that highlights outdoor-oriented activities across the region.
 - 1.3.2. Link strategies to housing options, downtown revitalization, university partnerships, and a broader business recruitment strategy.
 - 1.3.3. Host events of various sizes at local venues and promote these assets within and outside of the region.
 - Consider local venues such as the following: Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, Western Colorado University, Gunnison County Fairgrounds, I Bar Ranch.
 - Coordinate with local companies, such as bike shops, who are aligned with tourism-based events and may be able to host small-scale gatherings.
- 1.4. Leverage land use policies to further place-based goals.
 - 1.4.1. Identify transformative development projects early in the process to maximize community benefit.
 - 1.4.2. Acquire, assemble, and market properties adjacent to or in downtown, or along the waterfront.
 - Develop a real estate strategy to determine which properties to prioritize, and when.
 - Generally, prioritize acquiring properties that allow for development on Main Street, especially where land is currently vacant or underutilized.
 - 1.4.3. Coordinate with industrial landowners to consolidate properties as part of a strategy to assemble and market larger parcels for export-oriented businesses.
 - 1.4.4. Encourage infill development in built areas and preserving land currently used for agriculture or ranching.
 - 1.4.5. Protect existing commercial and industrial land.
- 1.5. Partner to cultivate and attract entrepreneurs and new industries to Gunnison.
 - 1.5.1. Develop a retention strategy for Western Colorado University students.
 - Facilitate connections between students in Western Colorado University's Innovation & Entrepreneurship program with local mentors, peers, and available real estate.
 - 1.5.2. Attract entrepreneurs with Gunnison's quality of life, key assets, and available office and industrial space.
 - 1.5.3. Support and strengthen Gunnison's target industries: food processing and manufacturing, construction services, and outdoor recreation.
 - Ensure that high school career and technical education (CTE) programs in construction fields are aligned with locally in-demand occupations by facilitating connections among employers, educational institutions, and workforce providers.
 - Connect high school students with in-demand career pathways through certification programs, relevant coursework at Western Colorado University, apprenticeships, and internships.

- Work with Crested Butte Community School to connect CTE students with opportunities in Gunnison post-graduation.
- Develop tourism and value-added manufacturing opportunities for Gunnison-based agriculture businesses that leverage existing resources such as the Gunnison Valley Producers' Guild and the Gunnison Farmers Market.
- Attract a meat processing facility to Gunnison that is focused on serving local ranchers, which could then market product to nearby retail, restaurants, and food-serving anchor institutions such as the hospital and the university.

1.5.4. Develop tech transfer opportunities at Western Colorado University.

- Inventory faculty's current areas of focus and research to identify commercialization potential.
- Identify the extent to which the university's current lab, funding, and partnership resources are sufficient to support commercialization opportunities.
- Establish a technology transfer office within the university or a primary point of contact within an existing department.
- Procure legal counsel to create policies in support of a tech transfer program.
- Educate, support, and connect faculty, industry, and investors about current work and future potential related to tech transfer opportunities.

1.5.5. Create a medical innovation district.

- Align this focus area with the talent at Gunnison Valley Health, Western Colorado University's relevant degree programs such as rural community health and high-altitude exercise physiology, and outdoor recreation such as the treatment of ski-related injuries.
- Identify a geographic location for the innovation district that can accommodate lab and incubator space for entrepreneurs.
- Build out the support infrastructure for the innovation district, to include local institutions, outside research institutions, tech firms, and funders.
- Launch and promote an innovation incubator or accelerator program along with the medical innovation district.



Matt Burt photo

GOAL 2. GROW THE OUTDOOR RECREATION ECONOMY

Support Gunnison's outdoor recreation businesses, workforce, and assets.

In addition to offering a sense of community and a high quality of life, one of Gunnison's strongest competitive advantages is the proximity to outdoor recreation assets. The community is currently known for its trail system and proximity to skiing in Crested Butte, and there is significant room for growth in an extension of the outdoor recreation economy. Much of this exists already, but the organizations, initiatives, and opportunities are not fully connected and leveraged. The recommendations in this section seek to bolster the outdoor recreation economy for entrepreneurs, grow the local workforce, and maintain both access to and quality of local amenities for residents and visitors.

The success of this initiative is closely linked to the development of new lodging options. Currently, Gunnison is limited by a small number of hotels and available beds for visitors. Adding new lodging with a destination or experiential focus and meeting space is a key part of increasing tax revenues, increasing tourism year-round, and recruiting new businesses. The impact of new lodging tax revenue can be significant. In nearby Ouray, during 2023, [local taxes on hotel stays generated more than \\$770,000](#) and a tax on [short-term rentals generated over \\$600,000](#), contributing to affordable housing and capital improvements. In 2020, voters in Fruita, Colorado, approved a lodging tax increase from 3 percent to 6 percent; [this revenue is used to fund marketing and economic development and generated \\$192,000 in 2023](#).

2.1. Support outdoor equipment entrepreneurs.

- 2.1.1. Expand the outdoor industry funding summit by leveraging existing resources, such as the Gunnison River Partnership; incorporating additional risk capital sources; and connecting university students in engineering and entrepreneurship programs.
- 2.1.2. Revive the outdoor business accelerator program, whether with the Moosejaw Outdoor Accelerator program or another partner.
- 2.1.3. Connect entrepreneurs with available commercial and industrial space throughout their growth lifecycle and consider their real estate needs in catalyst projects.
- 2.1.4. Publicize local success stories, and leverage those to recruit new entrepreneurs to the outdoor equipment space.

2.2. Recruit companies focused on product development and testing.

- 2.2.1. Attend outdoor industry-focused events, such as the Colorado Outdoor Industry Leadership Summit, to build networks.
- 2.2.2. Develop a marketing campaign focused on Gunnison's competitive edge in the outdoor recreation economy. Possible product focus areas include high-altitude performance and equipment, snow and avalanche science, and all-terrain electric bicycles.
- 2.2.3. Create a database of available space and shovel-ready sites to share during business recruitment efforts.

2.3. Invest in growing, marketing, and sustaining outdoor assets.

- 2.3.1. Create a staff position (or partial position) dedicated to growing and sustaining the outdoor recreation economy.
- 2.3.2. Ensure representation on the Colorado Outdoor Recreation Advisory Group.

- 2.3.3.** Develop visitor itineraries that connect major tour operators with Gunnison’s outdoor assets and connect these tours with overnight stays at local lodging.
- 2.3.4.** Market Gunnison’s lodging and tourism assets to in-town and regional event attendees.
- 2.3.5.** Prioritize sustaining, maintaining, and enhancing Gunnison’s outdoor recreation assets.
 - Ensure regular maintenance of hiking, biking, and motorized trails to mitigate erosion and other effects of overuse or underuse.
 - Launch a responsible tourism campaign to encourage outdoor recreation users to care for Gunnison’s natural areas.
 - Measure and report on the economic impacts of Gunnison’s outdoor assets to encourage support investing in these spaces.
- 2.3.6.** Establish Gunnison as a leader in gravel biking for all skill levels.
 - Invest in developing, sustaining, and marketing trail networks.
 - Host gravel bike-focused multiday events.
- 2.4.** Increase lodging availability to accommodate additional visitors and provide meeting or conference space.
 - 2.4.1.** Identify potential sites to market to hoteliers.
 - 2.4.2.** Attract developers with products that align with Gunnison’s environmental and cultural characteristics.
 - 2.4.3.** Remove regulatory barriers to creative lodging approaches and products.



Matt Burt photo

GOAL 3. LEVERAGE SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Position Gunnison as a leader in science and technology that capitalizes on local competitive advantages.

The Gunnison Valley is environmentally unique, presenting an opportunity to link the outdoor recreation economy with activities in research, science, and technology. Several large institutions—such as Western Colorado University, ICELab, and Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory—are already in the valley. Increased coordination and cooperation among them will better position the community to be a hub of product development and testing that attracts entrepreneurs, researchers, and remote workers.

3.1. Develop a retention strategy to place Western Colorado University students in local jobs.

- 3.1.1. Connect students with internship and mentoring opportunities with local businesses, entrepreneurs, and research institutions.
- 3.1.2. Host networking events for students, business owners, and entrepreneurs in science and technology, highlighting post-graduation pathways.
- 3.1.3. Integrate incubator and coworking space with student-centered workspaces to create a nexus of innovation and entrepreneurship.

3.2. Expand outdoor and environmental technology innovation.

- 3.2.1. Facilitate deeper connections between the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory's research programs and the community by connecting fellowships with local entrepreneurship and industry assets.
- 3.2.2. Support network connections among the high-altitude performance lab at Western Colorado University, entrepreneurs, and companies focused on product development and testing.
- 3.2.3. Encourage partnerships among conservation organizations, regional higher education, and national park or forest staff for research on climate science.
- 3.2.4. Market Gunnison's solar and geothermal potential to by attracting businesses focused on clean energy, heat pump, and energy storage technology. Connect students in Western Colorado University's computer science and engineering programs with related to these efforts.

3.3. Promote and integrate Gunnison as a remote work destination.

- 3.3.1. Prioritize marketing to workers in outdoor recreation, technology, and environmental science.
- 3.3.2. Offer coworking space downtown with reliable broadband.
- 3.3.3. Host community-building networking events to connect local entrepreneurs, businesses, and remote workers.
- 3.3.4. Refine regulations to mitigate potential housing and environmental impacts of a larger remote workforce.

Planning Context



STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

TIP conducted an analysis of Gunnison’s competitive position with comparisons to the six Central Western Slope Region 10 counties, the state of Colorado, and the US. Initial data collection began in September 2024 during TIP’s discovery phase and the analytical work continued into the final phase of the engagement. An in-depth quantitative and geospatial analysis was delivered to the City of Gunnison in early 2025 in an interactive data visualization, the menu of which is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Menu of the Interactive Deliverable

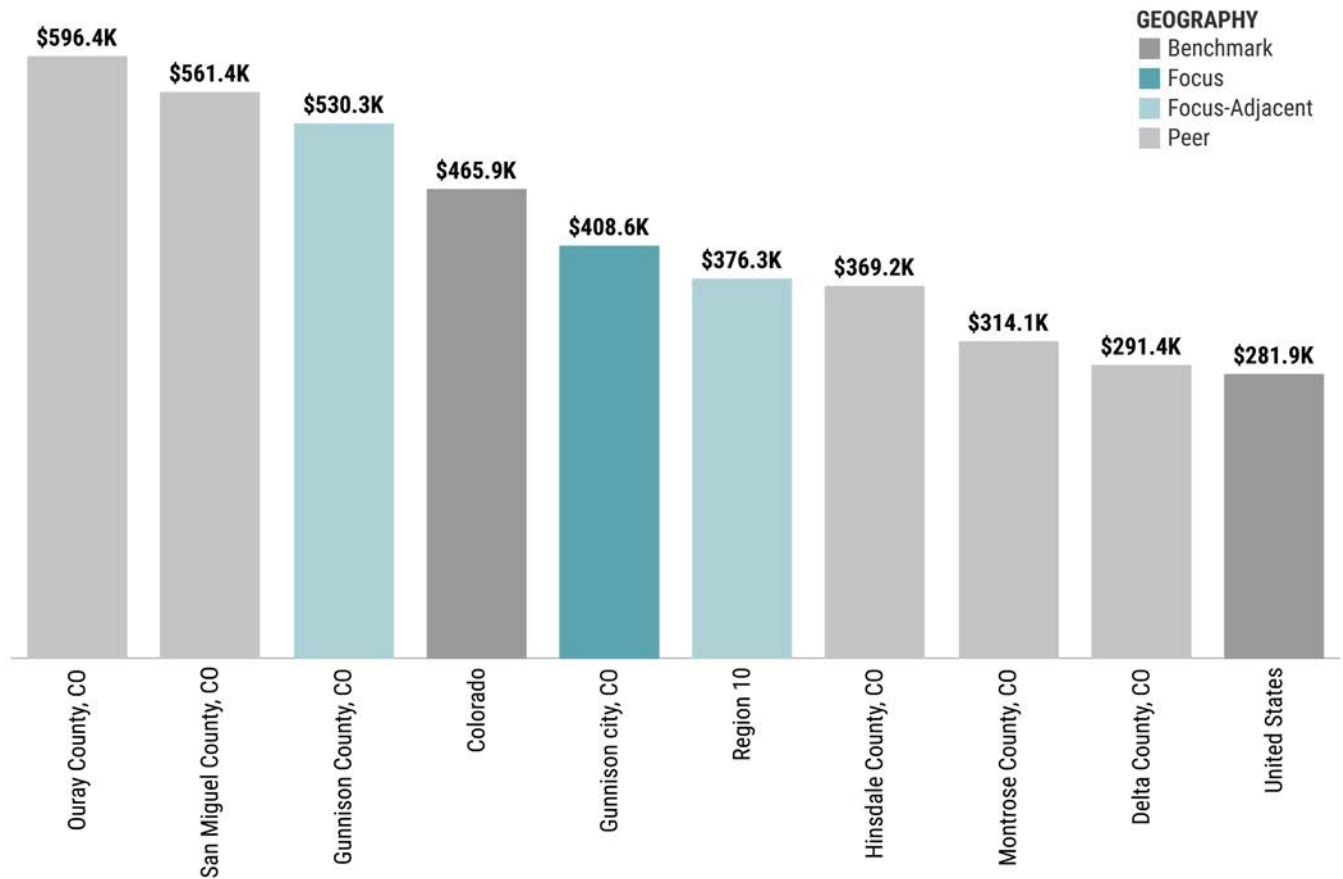


Source(s): TIP Strategies, Inc.

Place-based investments can improve local affordability and economic resilience.

Housing affordability represents an ongoing issue in Gunnison, with the median value of an owner-occupied home exceeding \$408,000 (Figure 5, page 17). Additionally, median household income in Gunnison is more than \$24,000 below that of Colorado, making housing generally less affordable locally than an already-prohibitive statewide housing market. Among its peer communities, which includes all Region 10 member counties, the city has an exceedingly high share of renters, with 56 percent of occupied housing units rented rather than owned, well over both the statewide (30.8 percent) and national figures (31.4 percent). Limited affordability is further reflected in Gunnison County’s drivers of population change. After a decade of positive domestic migration, the county has begun to see net domestic outmigration in recent years. Improvements to the city’s affordability and quality-of-life offerings can allow it to better attract new entrepreneurs and workers in strategic growth areas (industries).

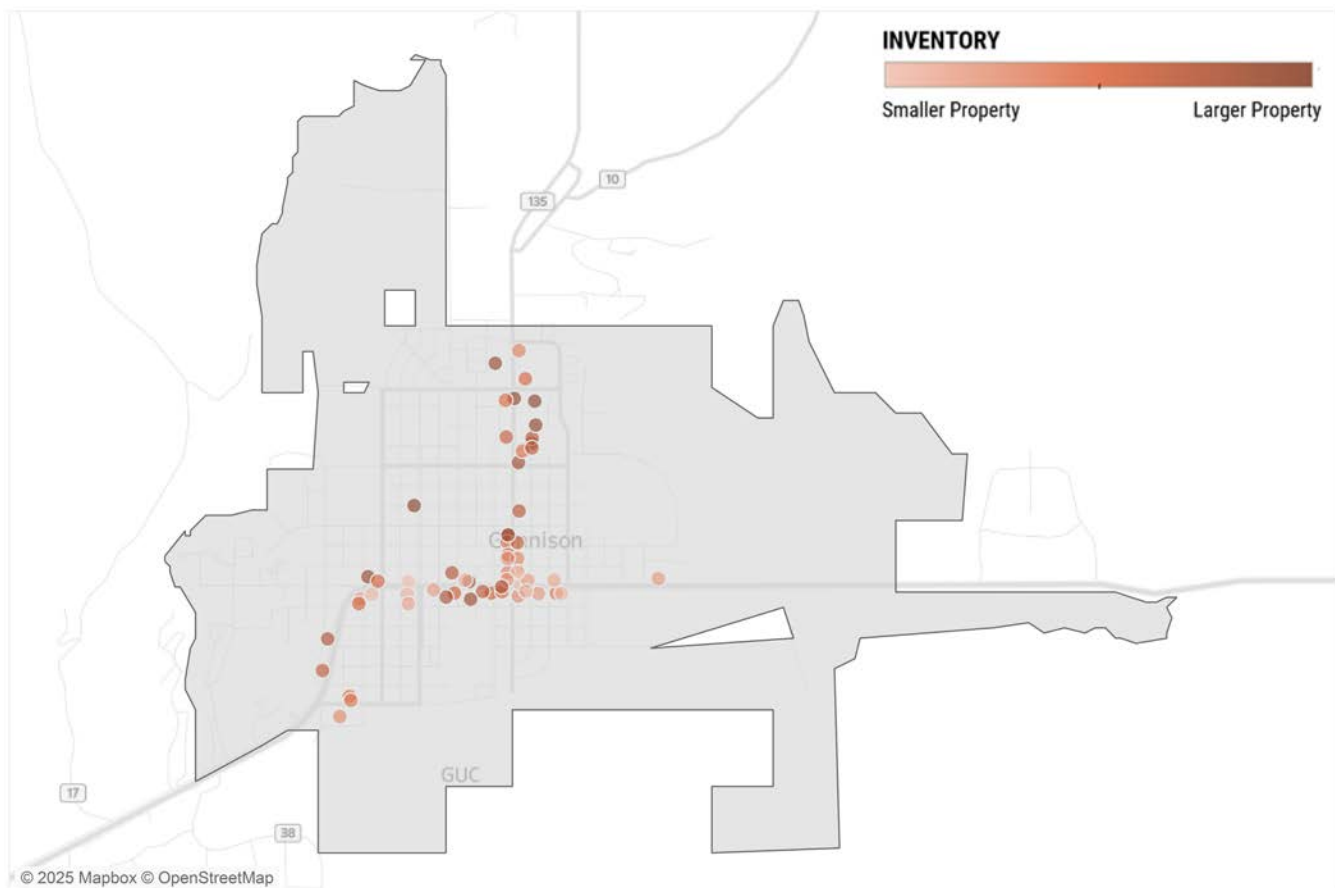
Figure 5. Median Value of Owned Homes, 2022
Owner-Occupied Housing Units



Source(s): 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year sample; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Note(s): Region 10 consists of Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, and San Miguel Counties, Colorado.

Gunnison's downtown represents a major asset that can be leveraged for quality-of-life growth. Much of the city's retail inventory is located along Highways 50 and 135 near downtown (Figure 6, page 18). In fact, more than 80 percent of Gunnison's working residents live within a five-minute walk of a retail property. Citywide real estate metrics, like high rent and low vacancy of retail properties, suggest opportunities for the city to leverage downtown for commercial development and redevelopment in support of a more robust local economy. A vibrant, walkable downtown that is accessible to residents also presents an opportunity for central community gathering places to host events, contributing to a distinct local identity.

Figure 6. Gunnison (city), Colorado, Retail Inventory

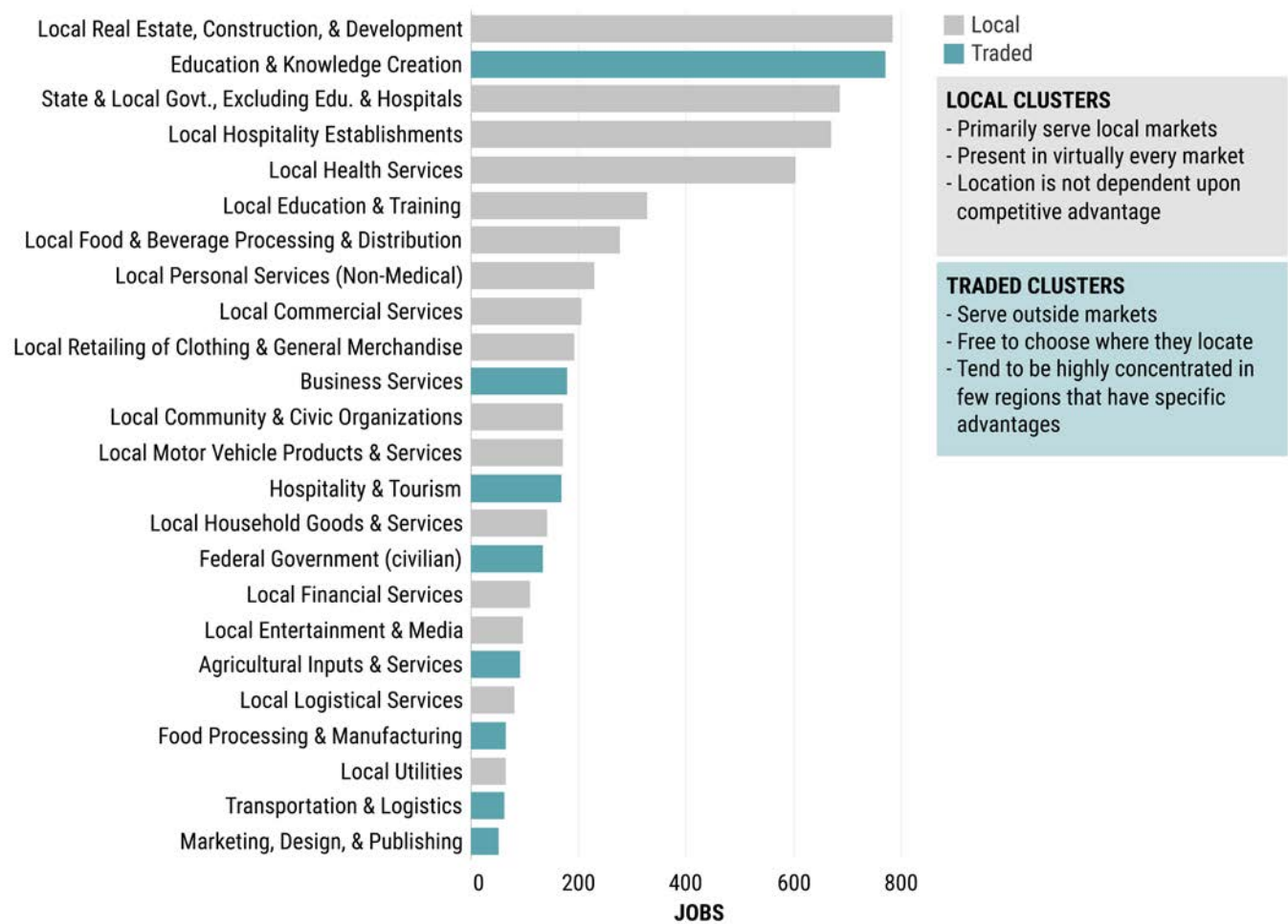
Source(s): CoStar Group; US Census Bureau, 2023 TIGER/Line Shapefiles; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Note(s): Darker reds indicate larger properties. Inventories are measured in square feet for office, retail, and industrial; rooms for hotels; and units for apartments. All data are estimated by CoStar as of mid-September 2024 and represent a snapshot in time.

Target industries represent a way to expand traded sector strengths beyond education.

Traded sectors are those that serve outside markets. High traded sector employment within a market represents specific competitive advantages of that region. Gunnison's largest traded sector is Education & Knowledge Creation, with its 770 jobs representing nearly 12 percent of the city's total employment and reflecting Western Colorado University's importance in the local economy. However, traded sector strengths outside of the university are limited. Business Services and Hospitality & Tourism represent the second and third highest concentration of industries for the City of Gunnison, respectively; however, both demonstrate significantly smaller employment numbers than the traded Education sector (Figure 7, page 19).

Figure 7. US Economic Development Administration Industry Clusters, Job Count
Gunnison (city), Colorado, Employment by Industry Cluster, 2023



Source(s): US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS); Lightcast 2024.3—Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; US Economic Development Administration, Institute for Strategy and Competitiveness, Harvard Business School; TIP Strategies, Inc.

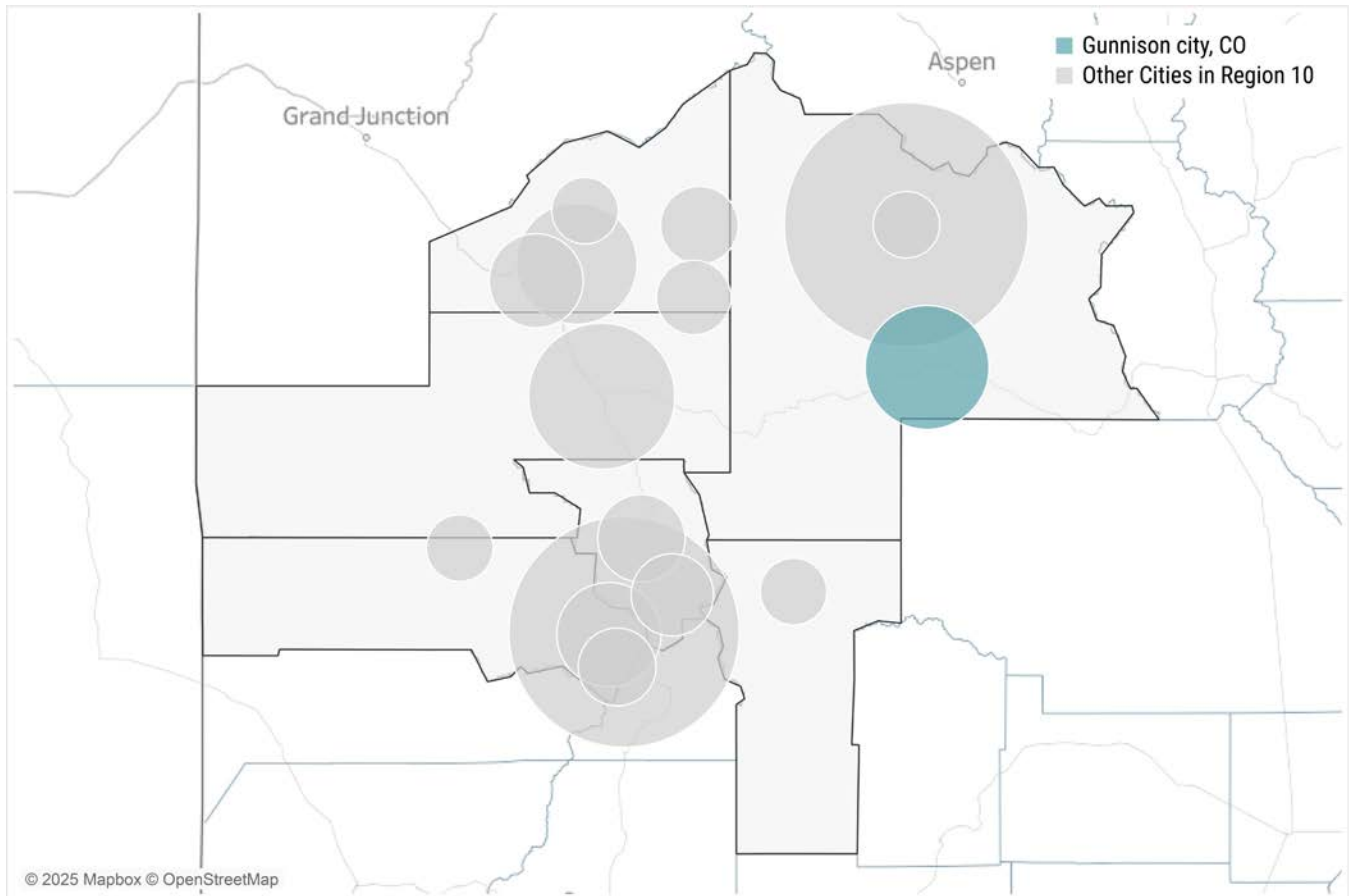
Note(s): Gunnison (city), Colorado, is approximated by ZIP Codes 81230 and 81231. Only clusters with at least 50 jobs in the city in 2023 are included. Due to outlying data estimates, Gunnison (city) job counts for the State & Local Government, Excluding Education & Hospitals, and Federal Government (civilian) clusters for the years 2007–2009 were scaled to match the county-level employment concentration of these clusters.

Outdoor recreation represents a major component of the region's tourism industry. Much of Region 10's demand for jobs in Outdoor Recreation, one of the city's target industries, has predictably originated from its ski communities. Job postings in Crested Butte (41.7 percent) and Telluride (35.5 percent) dominated this sector from 2022 through 2024 (Figure 8, page 20). This is despite higher shares of job postings in other target industries—Construction Services and Food Chain Production—originating from the region's larger cities like Delta, Montrose, and Gunnison.

The City of Gunnison has an opportunity to expand its local outdoor recreation offerings to attract visitors independent of seasonality and its proximity to ski communities, growing its traded Hospitality & Tourism sector. Attracting increased outdoor recreation assets and events does, however, necessitate an increase in available real estate. Regionwide, hotel rates have climbed in recent years and an increase in Gunnison's lodging options represents a way to better attract and capture revenue from local and regional tourists. Likewise, maintaining the infrastructure to support shovel-ready sites and turnkey properties for future employers represents a way to draw target industry employers.

Figure 8. Outdoor Recreation Demand

Based on an Analysis of Three Years of Job Postings in Region 10, January 2022–December 2024



Source(s): BLS; Lightcast 2024.3—QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Note(s): Region 10 consists of Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, and San Miguel Counties, Colorado. Circles show percentage share of unique job postings from target industry employers in Region 10 by location. Larger circles indicate higher shares. Job postings include non-staffing, unique, newly posted job postings for full-time, part-time, and flexible positions, excluding internships, between January 2022 and December 2024.

Supporting innovation can allow Gunnison to capitalize on the presence of Western Colorado University.

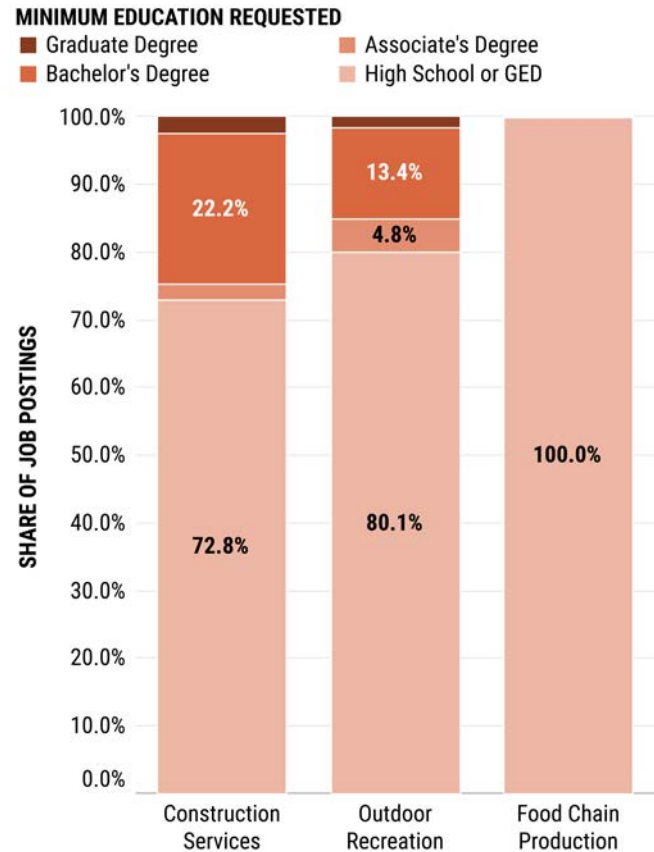
Many of the most frequently posted jobs within Gunnison's target industries have a low barrier to entry. Across Construction Services, Outdoor Recreation, and Food Chain Production, a significant majority of Region 10 job postings from the start of 2022 through the end of 2024 required only a high school-level education (Figure 9). Additionally, more than 40 percent of job postings in each target industry required less than a year of related work experience. The drawback of these modest credential requirements is that many top occupations within the target industries represent relatively low-wage jobs. Across all three target industries, the average advertised wage for the 10 most posted occupations was below the regional living wage threshold for a single adult.

As Gunnison seeks to leverage science and technology to drive outdoor and environmental innovation, Western Colorado University continues to be a major contributor toward increasing both the community's traded sector strengths and its availability of high-wage jobs.

Gunnison is home to a highly educated population, as most residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree. The city has the lowest self-employment rate among its peer communities, at 3.2 percent. With the potential for both coworking spaces and business incubators, downtown redevelopment represents an opportunity to encourage local collaboration and provide resources for both entrepreneurs and remote workers. Enhancing amenities around outdoor recreation and community gathering spaces can diversify local job offerings and expand traded sector strengths. In addition, continued efforts to provide affordable housing can allow the city to better retain Western Colorado University graduates while drawing in target industry talent and remote workers.

Figure 9. Target Industry Qualifications, Education Requirements

Based on an Analysis of Three Years of Job Postings in Region 10, January 2022–December 2024



Source(s): BLS; Lightcast 2024.3—QCEW Employees, Non-QCEW Employees, and Self-Employed; TIP Strategies, Inc.

Note(s): Region 10 consists of Delta, Gunnison, Hinsdale, Montrose, Ouray, and San Miguel Counties, Colorado. Job postings include non-staffing, unique, newly posted job postings for full-time, part-time, and flexible positions, excluding internships, in Region 10 between January 2022 and December 2024.

SWOT ANALYSIS

During the initial phase of the project, the consulting team gathered qualitative input from local stakeholders in Gunnison concerning local economic development issues. In addition, TIP conducted quantitative data analyses to understand Gunnison's competitive position in the region. The results of these efforts informed the following strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis.

The four components of a SWOT analysis can be defined as follows.

- **Strengths:** Assets and resources that can be built on to grow, strengthen, and diversify the local economy.
- **Weaknesses:** Liabilities and barriers to economic development that could limit economic growth potential.
- **Opportunities:** Competitive advantages and positive trends that hold significant potential for the attraction of new businesses, investments, and skilled workers.
- **Threats:** Unfavorable factors and trends (often external) that could negatively affect the local/regional economy.

Figure 10. Summary of SWOT Analysis for Gunnison

|  Strengths |  Weaknesses |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong sense of community • Natural environment, access to outdoor recreation • Local airport • Western Colorado University educational opportunities • Gunnison Valley Health • Engaged organizations: TAPP, ICELab, chamber, small business leaders, etc. • Commitment to Gunnison from local business community • Ski area • Economic and cultural impact of ranching • Proximity to Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic isolation: logistic challenges, higher costs for development and for goods/services • Increasing vacancies downtown • Lack of a central gathering spot • Limited amenities for visitors: hotels, restaurants • Silos between organizations • Major thoroughfares disrupt downtown • Workforce shortages • Limited resources for Gunnison-focused economic development |
|  Opportunities |  Threats |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development projects, e.g., Gunnison Rising, Urban Villages, Masonic Lodge redevelopment • Events strategy linked to economic development • Deeper town and gown (university) connections • Retain university graduates • Cultivate outdoor recreation industry • Capitalize on tourism revenue (lodging tax) • Industrial land assembly • New lodging opportunities • Remote workers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased housing availability and affordability • Decreasing commercial and industrial affordability • Declining tax revenues • Infrastructure limitations • Resistance to change, no-growth sentiment • Climate change (could also be an opportunity compared with other communities) • Federal funding uncertainty |



www.tipstrategies.com

+1 512 3439113

contact@tipstrategies.com