



# Rio Blanco County Economic Development Strategy

Phase I – Community Assessment

Prepared by: Better City

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In the past year Rio Blanco County (the “County”) has experienced a significant amount of economic stress as the price of oil and gas has dropped due to a supply glut. The drop in demand has caused drilling and pipeline companies to leave the County, taking with them valuable jobs and financial support for County and community programs. Many housing units and hotels are now empty and local business owners are feeling the strain of decreasing demand for goods and services.

The County has engaged with Better City to assist in developing and implementing an economic diversification strategy plan geared toward lessening the County’s over-reliance upon energy extraction industries.

Phase I of the project (this report) is a community assessment that identified recent economic trends, community assets, key stakeholders etc. and determined how these factors can be aligned with the community’s goals and desires for the future. The project also includes an assessment of the community’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in context of economic development, and provides a vision with action steps of how to move the community forward.

In this regard, the Firm has identified a number of opportunities for economic development and has outlined

action steps that can be taken to begin to strengthen existing local businesses, while also setting a framework that will support diversification and economic growth.

The concepts and ideas presented in this document should not be viewed as final conclusions, but rather as a framework for additional idea generation that will be refined over the other phases of the project.

## COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

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Although the communities of Rangely and Meeker are separated by less than 60 miles and are heavily dependent upon natural resource extraction, the available assets and the prevailing culture are quite different in the two communities. Therefore, each community will be addressed and analyzed separately. The methodology in the community assessment involved meeting with various stakeholders such as town and county leaders, business owners, long-time residents, and community visionaries. The purpose of these private interviews was to gain context into the history of the area and to hear first-hand examples of what it is like to live, work, and grow a business in Rio Blanco County.

### MEEKER, COLORADO

#### Economic History and Recent Trends

Meeker has a rich history tracing its origins back to the days of Nathan Meeker, and even earlier with the Ute Indian tribes. The local economy was largely agrarian with a significant amount of farming, ranching and hunting occurring on the banks of the White River and in the nearby mountains. Reliance upon the land as a major economic driver has continued into the modern era with the

discovery of energy resources such as coal, oil and gas. The citizens of the town feel a deep connection to the landscape, and have learned to live with the challenges that come with the boom and bust cycles that are common to the extraction industry. However, a growing concern among the citizens, and particularly business owners, is the immense difficulty of running and growing a private enterprise in the midst of fluctuations of global commodity prices. Change and growth, which has been avoided for years by the local population, is now being considered by many, and embraced by some.

As the county seat, Meeker has a large percentage of its labor force working for the town, county, or Federal government, which has been a benefit in helping to prevent the massive job losses and the negative impacts that have occurred in other areas of the county and the region during the most recent oil-price slump and resulting economic downturn. However, because the town of Meeker has relied on the public sector for a major percentage of its salary base, the economy is not as strong or diversified in the private sector as a community of this size should be. Necessity is the father of innovation, and between the government jobs and the energy industry jobs, the town of Meeker, and Rio Blanco at large, have not felt the immediate necessity to diversify until recently.

## Goals and Ideas of the Community

Several key themes surfaced throughout the interviews with community stakeholders. Among them was the desire to 1) preserve and stabilize the downtown, 2) recruit additional manufacturing employers, 3) bring back a second grocery store and 4) provide additional resources to help citizens and visitors connect with local recreational opportunities.

The downtown area, centered along Main Street and Market Street between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> street, has seen a number of businesses close their doors, or relocate in recent years. One of the major drivers of this slowdown is the lack of foot traffic, or any traffic along Main Street. Highway traffic moves along Market Street, but there is little incentive to draw travelers, or even local citizens into the historic downtown core. The elementary school was a historic driver of downtown foot traffic, but after it relocated to the northeast side of town, some downtown business owners experienced a significant decrease in traffic and at least one business chose to relocate to the highway as a direct result.

The downtown area is lacking a sense of place, or an amenity that serves as a unique focal point and gathering place for the community. Future sections of this report will be centered on creating corridors to drive traffic into the downtown area to stabilize the existing businesses and encourage future investment.

Manufacturers in Meeker include Natural Soda, Headhunter and Rocky Mountain Bowstrings. Manufacturing jobs are typically more stable than gas and oil jobs and are an important aspect in diversifying the local economy. A concept that will be explored in greater detail later in this report is the potential of helping the existing manufacturers grow, leverage their presence to expand the manufacturing cluster, and thus capture more value at the local level.

A grocery store is an important component to any community and can play a significant role in creating a positive (or negative) image and identity of a town. Most rural communities rely on a single grocery store, and the lack of competition can create a negative dynamic in the community. Although Meeker was once home to two grocery stores, it currently only houses one and a fair number of interviewees noted the negative impact of not having a second store.

Meeker is home to beautiful scenery, abundant wildlife, and a river with world-class fishing. A common sentiment expressed in the interviews is that although the community is home to so many unique natural resources, information regarding how and where to participate in these activities is limited. The community is aware of efforts by the Recreation District and others to better mark and promote the local recreation trails, but there is a degree of frustration in how long that process is taking. Additional public outreach may help alleviate frustration.



Additional topics and concepts that were discussed in local interviews are summarized in the word in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Meeker Interview Word Cloud

## Asset Inventory

Meeker currently has three major assets that need to be leveraged together in any economic development, or redevelopment plan, namely: 1) the downtown, 2) Highway 13, and 3) the White River. The downtown area has a few historic building assets including the Meeker Hotel, as well as new architecture with the

municipal and county buildings. The downtown core has the potential of providing a sense of pride, and place for the community, but vacancies and turnover have prevented this from occurring.

The Highway is a great asset to the community and has Average Annual Daily Traffic counts greater than 6,000. However, Meeker has not been able to capitalize on the highway traffic due to the speed at which travelers pass through town. There are currently no controlled intersections along the highway, and there aren't any amenities or attractions visible from the road that would entice a traveler to stop. Additionally, the speed and frequency of the traffic makes it difficult for pedestrians to cross the highway, effectively severing the downtown from the river and the public park. In this regard, the Highway is an infrastructure asset, but the lack of controlled intersections is an impediment that must be addressed.



The White River is an excellent Class II river with a relatively large width ranging between 60 and 100 feet as it passes through Meeker. The river boasts some of the best fishing in Colorado, although much of the river has restricted access imposed by private landowners along its banks. However, there is public access within Meeker, which could be exploited to a greater degree. In addition to fishing, the river is often used during the summer months for floating and other recreational activities.

Currently these assets are parallel to each other, and are disparate components of the community. To greater leverage these assets into a cohesive story that can attract visitors and investment, a development project should be undertaken to connect these assets conceptually and physically. The opportunity will be discussed in detail later in this report, but the basic concept is to create a corridor that connects the three assets together. The corridor would facilitate and funnel traffic from the highway into the downtown area, as well as the river.

The Recreation District is a valuable community asset not only in terms of the physical amenities that are currently available, but also because of the district's financial stability and willingness to participate in additional projects. The Recreation District will be an important partner in developing the corridor concept described above.

An additional asset planned, but not yet completed, is the broadband development and fiber project. Rio Blanco County has been proactive in promoting and encouraging the community to catch the vision of a broadband network. The current availability, or lack thereof, of high-speed Internet is a liability that will greatly impact the county's ability to recruit additional businesses, such as location neutral businesses or manufacturers that rely on the Internet to manage and coordinate logistics. The local governments should continue to push broadband and do everything possible to accelerate the installation and implementation of a high-speed fiber network.

The lack of attractive, high quality development along the highway is a liability to the community that needs to be addressed. As visitors and potential residents pass through town, the view from the highway doesn't deliver the message or create the impression that Meeker is a vibrant community with access to world-class recreational opportunities. Rather, it communicates a sleepy rural town that doesn't have much to offer. Pairing a traffic controlled intersection with the corridor development discussed previously will go a long way in communicating the vibrancy of the community and will help divert traffic off the main road and into the historic downtown, or onto the river.

## Aversion to Change

All communities have a subset of the population that opposes growth and change because of the fear that the community will lose its identity and will stop being the town that was attractive to them in the first place. This subset is typically quite vocal, as is the case in Meeker. Public outreach is an important step to help calm any anxieties toward change, but ultimately the community stakeholders need to realize that change is necessary in order to stay relevant for the next generation. With the right projects and the right message, the momentum moving forward will be greater than the opposition to keep the status quo. The Town of Meeker can progress, despite the efforts of those who attempt to make it seem impossible and unwanted.

## RANGELY, COLORADO

### Economic History and Recent Trends

Rangely Colorado's history, both politically and economically, has been tied directly to the oil field situated under and around the town. The Town of Rangely was founded on November 11, 1882 and officially incorporated in 1947 as the oil camp-turned-municipality took shape along the banks of the White River. The town then, and through most of its history, has relied upon the oil wells for

employment, property tax, and overall prosperity. When the demand for oil has been high, the town is a thriving community that appears to be bursting at the seams. During downturns such as the current one, local business owners struggle as the transient workforce leaves for greener pastures. The oil field has been a tremendous asset to the community historically, and will continue to be, but additional diversification and investment is needed to ensure the long-term success of the community.

Rangely has had a difficult time coping with the housing challenges associated with the boom and bust oil economy. During boom cycles, housing is scarce and the price is driven up to the point that non-oil workers have a hard time affording quality housing. Schoolteachers, hospitality workers and small business owners have typically been hit the hardest by the lack of affordable housing. During bust cycles, the situation doesn't improve very quickly either because landlords face bleak occupancy rates and have kept permanent housing rates higher than can be supported.

An additional factor impacting the local economy is the unfavorable developable landscape. Rangely is essentially landlocked in the midst of a vast expanse of BLM land, with much of private land being held by a single family and branching descendants. Previous attempts by individuals and groups to acquire land from the family have not been successful. Development on additional areas of the town, or

land that could be annexed from the BLM will likely face serious slope issues. As a result, the town has nearly grown to its limits.

Another factor affecting the town and the oil industry specifically is the oil impact fees. Multiple oil companies expressed their annoyance with the county regarding the rigidity of the fees, and cited multiple examples of companies that had moved drilling projects to Utah, or other counties in Colorado with less strict drilling fees and regulations. It is likely that a few negative experiences have circulated throughout the community and have created the perception of a situation that is worse than reality. Nevertheless, the community views the county government regulations as an impediment to growth and jobs... particularly during the latest downturn.

### Goals and Ideas of the Community

The most common goal expressed in the interviews was a desire to expand tourism by leveraging the area's expansive network of ATV trails and the Rangely Rock Crawling Park. The ATV trails and rock crawling park provide a sense of pride for the community and many citizens reported going out to the hills frequently. The Chamber has been proactive on this subject and has recently applied for grants that would fund a campaign to enhance trail markings.

Another goal of the community is to improve the local retail and service providers. Many citizens expressed frustration with local shopping, particularly in the grocery category. The citizens talked of limited selection of the types of products the community wants, and outrageous prices for available items that were causing them to make long weekend trips to Vernal or Grand Junction to purchase groceries along with other goods and services. Conversely, storeowners expressed frustration with unrealistic expectations for a rural community and the difficulty of competing with giant service providers such as Amazon and Wal-Mart.

However, during personal visits to the grocery store, consultants found it to be well stocked—except for frozen foods—with prices that are in the right range for what we have observed in other rural communities. The dichotomy signals frustration generally with the management of the local store and selection and pricing have become the alibis for other underlying issues.

The local True Value hardware store is a great example of how good management can overcome the rural frustration. The owner is a local citizen, and has gone to great lengths to listen to his customers and has responded proactively to make sure that he is relevant and is meeting the needs of his customers. The grocery store owner, located outside the community, has not been as proactive about making adjustments to meet local demand. Local management has

recently made adjustments to better serve local customers, but the local manager has restricted capacity to make additional and necessary changes without the owner's approval. The lack of action on the owner's part has been reciprocated by a lack of patronage from local customers. The situation can be remedied, but will likely require recruiting a new operator.

Another theme discussed is a desire to better connect the community with the reservoir and the river. The annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July firework show is done at the reservoir, and some of the locals use the resource for fishing or boating, but generally speaking the citizens don't connect with the local water resources, which is made manifest in the recent closure of the restaurant near the banks of the reservoir. However, with the exception of the Camper Park, the river is a little too far removed from the downtown area to be part of any near-term downtown redevelopment initiatives.

Additional concepts and ideas discussed in the interviews are summarized in the word cloud (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: Rangely Interview Word Cloud

### Asset Inventory

The greatest asset to the community is the availability of energy resources in such close proximity. Between the oil field and the Deserado Coal mine, Rangely is

energy rich and has been a major contributor to the region's energy demands. Non-local companies, such as Chevron, and transient laborers who only locate to the area when the demand for oil is high, capture a significant portion of the financial impact from these industries. However, permanent laborers and local business owners have also profited and the community is host to several retired oil-millionaires. Tax generated from the oil fields is also a significant part of the local government budget and has helped fund numerous projects around the community. Although this asset has declined recently, it will likely come back. In the meantime, the community should use this opportunity to focus energy on strengthening other aspects of the local economy.

Another asset to the community is the Colorado Northwestern Community College (CNCC). CNCC is one of the largest employers in the area, and is definitely the largest employer that is not directly tied to natural resource extraction. Although the campus is small, it has a great reputation within a few key program areas that can be leveraged to increase enrolment, and help CNCC become the contributor that it desires to be.

The airport is an important asset to the community. CNCC has built a very successful and well-respected aviation program, made possible by the close proximity of the airport. Other than CNCC's flight program and a few locals with airplanes, the airport is not utilized and has excess

capacity. One of the unique aspects of the airport is the availability of flight time and open air space, as well as its elevation of 5,200 feet. The high altitude provides excellent training opportunities for new pilots, especially in training new helicopter pilots, which could be an area of expansion for both the airport and CNCC's flight program.

The hospital is both an asset, and a liability that will affect the ability to conduct large development projects in the community. The hospital is an impressive building with state of the art equipment, but the \$40 million bonding project has soured the community and may limit the willingness of the locals to participate in any other large, publicly funded projects. To make matters worse, the hospital has more capacity and more capabilities than are warranted in the small rural community. For instance, the hospital has one of the nicest CT scanners available on the Western Slope, yet the hospital is not authorized to perform many, if any of the procedures that the hospital would be diagnosing with the machine. Therefore, many of the revenue-producing procedures are referred to other facilities.

The hotel situation in Rangely is a liability caused by the cyclical oil-based economy. All of the hotels face discouraging occupancy rates and all four hotels are for sale. If the occupancy rates are not improved, even the new Blue Mountain Inn will eventually fall into a similar state of disrepair as the other hotels.

Similar to the situation in Meeker, broadband is a crucial element of infrastructure that needs to be improved in Rangely. There are a few Internet entrepreneurs in Rangely that are attempting to build web-based companies, which is difficult with current Internet speeds. Additionally, the lack of a fiber network may become an increasing issue for CNCC recruiting efforts. As described previously, the County's broadband implementation plan is an important investment in the future of the community.

## SWOT – TOWN OF RANGELY

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The Town of Rangely faces significant impediments to stabilization and growth within its downtown core. This is reflected in its built environment and lack of demand drivers for commercial real estate and a defined sense of place. In reality, the state of the downtown is a symptom of a more severe economic illness. Accordingly, a strategy that addresses the illness present in the community's underlying economic drivers must first be developed prior to addressing the symptom of economic malaise being manifested in the community's downtown.

As such, this strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis for the Town of Rangely considers only those drivers within the local economy that are considered highly impactful. Although a more extensive

and comprehensive SWOT list would highlight additional elements, these have been deemed insufficient to drive economic change within the local economy and as such are excluded for the purposes of this analysis.

## STRENGTHS – TOWN OF RANGELY

The community is largely dependent on the oil & gas industry as its primary employer. As previously mentioned, outside of oil & gas, CNCC is one of the largest employers and provides economic diversification and stability to the local economy. CNCC has been successful in recruiting students based on price, athletic programs, and a focus on niche offerings.

The local Recreation and Parks District is highly regarded within the community and has developed impressive assets given the population size and funding limitations in a rural community.

The cost of living is low, as evidenced by a recent report from Business Insider that named Rangely as the most affordable small town in Colorado. The study was looking specifically at housing costs, but the study overlooked another area of advantage... utility costs. The electricity rates in Rangely are among the lowest in the nation with industrial users paying a usage rate that is less than 50% of the state and national average.

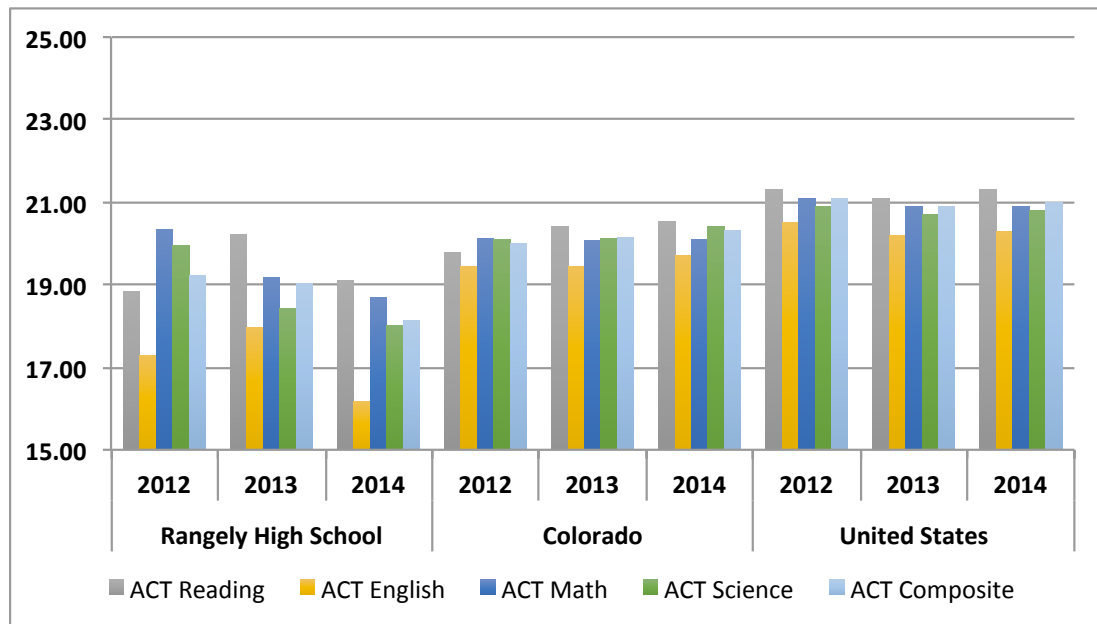


## WEAKNESSES – TOWN OF RANGELY

Rangely's weaknesses are its small population size, dependence on oil and gas, and distance from a large population base. The small population size results in few retail amenities, little housing demand, and limited local capacity to create quality of life assets. Dependence on oil and gas can be addressed by focusing on economic diversification. Although the rock crawling park has been successful in attracting outside tourists, it has not translated into significant room demand for local hotels.

Many of the students at CNCC are from the surrounding region and travel home during the weekends. This is due to a lack of local amenities, recreation, and social opportunities. CNCC is located on a plateau and is removed from Rangely's downtown. These factors all negatively impact local businesses.

According to interviews with local long-time residents, the education system in Rangely has historically been exceptional, and some reminisced about a time when the Rangely School District received recognition for spending more money per student than any other school in Colorado. This trend has shifted in recent years and now the Rangely School District lags behind the County and the state in performance metrics and ACT scores (see Figure 3).



Sources: Colorado Department of Education, ACT.org, NCES  
Figure 3: ACT Performance, Rangely High School

Lastly, as previously mentioned, much of the private land surrounding the community is owned by family trusts whose benefactors are more interested in future royalty payments from oil & gas extractors than current community development needs.



## OPPORTUNITIES – TOWN OF RANGELY

With few local assets, opportunities for furthering economic prosperity in Rangely will largely be dependent on leveraging CNCC and the County airport. With significant ongoing demand for pilots in the national and international markets and the growth in international student enrollment at community colleges, there exists an unprecedented opportunity to grow CNCC's pilot training program and capture additional market share.

Many student athletes attend CNCC to develop their athletic skills in order to compete for positions at other State universities. CNCC's athletic programs are uniquely positioned to capitalize on student athlete development.

There is also a percentage of the local workforce with welding and mechanical skills that are currently under-employed due to the cutbacks in the oil & gas industry. A new business could take advantage of these existing skillsets.

The low cost of living and favorable electricity rates may provide the opportunity to attract large electricity users to the region.

## THREATS – TOWN OF RANGELY

The oil and gas industry is subject to global price fluctuations in the oil & gas market. A decline in demand or oversupply of oil & gas will result in producers restricting supply to existing production assets that operate at low break-even points and cutting back exploration. Local employment is largely dependent on these external forces.

Competition for prospective students is a significant threat for CNCC, particularly with regards to the aviation program. The primary community college competitors for CNCC's aviation program include the Aims Community College in Greeley and the Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU of Denver). Both colleges are larger, more diversified in their offerings, and closer to a large population base than CNCC. However, MSU of Denver does not have any dedicated assets for their aviation program other than simulators. CNCC has recently entered into a strategic partnership with MSU of Denver to provide aviation to their students at the Rangely airport.

## RECOMMENDATIONS – TOWN OF RANGELY

### #1 – CNCC INTERNATIONAL STUDENT AVIATION STRATEGY

Growth at CNCC is critical to the long-term economic prosperity of Rangely. As such, a focus on growing the aviation and aviation maintenance programs should be a prioritized initiative of the community. Current enrollment levels at competing schools would indicate that CNCC is limited in its ability to attract significant enrollment in its aviation programs from within the State.

Recruiting international students to CNCC's aviation programs is one opportunity that can provide growth to the school while keeping the student population in the community over the weekend. According to a recent publication released by Boeing, there is unprecedented demand for pilots and airline mechanics in emerging markets (see Table 1). The largest market is the Asia Pacific region with 216,000 and 224,000 pilots and technicians, respectively, needed over the next 20 years from 2014 to 2033.

Table 1: Pilot and Aircraft Technician Demand

	Pilots	Technicians
Asia Pacific	216,000	224,000
Europe	94,000	102,000
North America	88,000	109,000
Middle East	55,000	62,000
Latin America	45,000	44,000
CIS*	18,000	24,000
Africa	17,000	19,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>533,000</b>	<b>584,000</b>
*Commonwealth of Independent States		

Source: Boeing - Pilot and Technician Outlook.

<http://www.boeing.com/commercial/market/long-term-market/pilot-and-technician-outlook/#/demand-for-pilots>. Accessed 04/27/2015.

Since 2006, new international students at community colleges have increased from 20,156 to 27,672, an average annual growth rate of 5.6%. International students attending community colleges are at an all time high with 32% of international students now attending community colleges (see Table 2).

Table 2: International Students and Community Colleges

Year	New Int'l Students at Associate's Institutions	Annual % Change	Total Int'l Students	% of Total Int'l Students at Associate's Institutions
2006/07	20,156	-	84,061	24%
2007/08	20,552	2%	86,683	24%
2008/09	28,335	38%	95,785	30%
2009/10	25,294	-11%	94,175	27%
2010/11	24,262	-4%	89,853	27%
2011/12	24,408	1%	87,997	28%
2012/13	26,880	10%	86,778	31%
2013/14	27,672	3%	87,963	32%
<b>Average</b>		<b>5.6%</b>		

Source: 2010 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

The Asia Pacific region is the largest source of international students at U.S. institutions of higher education. Specifically, the Asia Pacific region accounts for the top four countries of origin of international students (see Table 3). The region also accounts for the greatest percentage of international students that attend community college (see Table 4).

Table 3: Top 25 Countries of Origin for International Students

Rank	Place of Origin	Enrollment	% of Enrollment
1	China	14,778	16.8%
2	South Korea	9,676	11.0%
3	Vietnam	6,509	7.4%
4	Japan	5,542	6.3%
5	Mexico	3,782	4.3%
6	Saudi Arabia	3,606	4.1%
7	Hong Kong	2,639	3.0%
8	Indonesia	2,639	3.0%
9	Brazil	1,847	2.1%
10	Venezuela	1,847	2.1%
11	Sweden	1,671	1.9%
12	Taiwan	1,671	1.9%
13	India	1,671	1.9%
14	Canada	1,231	1.4%
15	Colombia	1,144	1.3%
16	Thailand	968	1.1%
17	Nigeria	880	1.0%
18	Philippines	792	0.9%
19	Turkey	792	0.9%
20	Russia	792	0.9%
21	Nepal	704	0.8%
22	France	704	0.8%
23	Pakistan	704	0.8%
24	United Kingdom	704	0.8%
25	Kazakhstan	528	0.6%
	All Others	20,144	22.9%
<b>WORLD TOTAL</b>		<b>87,963</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: 2010 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

Table 4: Asia Pacific Region and Community College

Place of Origin	Enrollment	% of Enrollment
China	14,778	16.8%
South Korea	9,676	11.0%
Vietnam	6,509	7.4%
Japan	5,542	6.3%
Hong Kong	2,639	3.0%
Indonesia	2,639	3.0%
Taiwan	1,671	1.9%
India	1,671	1.9%
Thailand	968	1.1%
Philippines	792	0.9%
Nepal	704	0.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>47,588</b>	<b>54%</b>

Source: 2010 Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

In summary, the Asia Pacific region leads the world not only in pilot and technician demand, but also in international student community college attendance. The combination presents CNCC with a generational opportunity to grow its market share by capturing additional international students from the Asia Pacific region who are seeking pilot and technician training. International students are typically highly motivated to succeed, bring with them a lot of discretionary spending money, and most importantly they don't travel home on the weekends. These non-commuter students can have a great impact on not only the campus, but also on the town of

Rangely as the students spend money and become integrated into the community.

Fortunately, CNCC is already a certified Student Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) school, which allows foreign students to enter the country and attend the college on an F-1 student visa.

#### Action Step 1 – Create Institutional Capacity / Funding

Budgetary constraints are often the primary reason why community colleges do not engage in international recruiting. As such, the first priority will be to establish CNCC's institutional capacity.

This can be accomplished through strategic partnerships between CNCC and Rio Blanco County, Town of Rangely, Rangely Chamber of Commerce, Rangely Airport, local businesses, State of Colorado, USDA, and the Economic Development Administration (EDA). Such partnerships will be focused on identifying and securing funding sources to assist the college in the establishment and ongoing operation of a Center for International Education (CIE).

#### Action Step 2 – Center for International Education

The CIE's mission will be to develop funding sources and profitable strategies for international recruiting focused on pilot and technician training programs. In addition, the CIE will be responsible for student retention by coordinating

with other college departments regarding housing and other supportive services to help accommodate international students.

It will be imperative that the CIE establish an online presence in Asia Pacific to engage with prospective students. In addition to social media marketing strategies, CNCC should consider hiring a consultant that is able to navigate the educational labyrinth of China and the Asia Pacific region and begin recruiting on the local level.

### Action Step 3 – Establish CIE Presence in Asia Pacific Region

A physical presence in the region should be a priority within the first five-years of the CIE. This can be accomplished by securing grants to fund the establishment of a global engagement office in the Asia Pacific region. Potential grantors include the U.S. State Department Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, Institute of International Education, Clinton Foundation, Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, and various others. Other community colleges have had success in securing grants to establish offices in Asia Pacific. For example, in 2012, the College of Lake County received a U.S. State Department grant to open an American Culture Center in Xi'an, China.

Travel expenses to the Asia Pacific region will be significant with average expenses for a recruiting trip topping ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) per person. Potential recruiting partnerships could be explored with the American

Association of Community Colleges and the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade to help defray travel costs.

Should CNCC's CIE be successful in recruiting just one twentieth of a percent (0.05%) of the existing Asia Pacific community college market it would increase enrollment by 24 students, doubling its flight program and providing a 9% increase over its present enrollment of 270 students at the Rangely campus.

### Action Step 4 – Reinvest in Marketing

Tuition from international student enrollment can be a significant revenue source for the college if a balanced approach to international recruiting expenditures is adopted. One community college that has been very successful with their international student enrollment earns \$14 million per year in tuition revenue from international students. This in turn provides the funding necessary to maintain their \$2 million per year international marketing and recruiting budget. Although this is an extreme example, the same approach should be adopted at CNCC. That is, a portion of the monies received through international student tuition should be reinvested to maintain an ongoing marketing and recruiting presence in the Asia Pacific region.

## #2 – ASIAN LANGUAGE CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Before the FAA allows internationals to begin flight training within the US, the prospective pilots need to pass an English proficiency test. Many of the private pilot schools in the country that cater to international students, don't actually offer English courses. Instead, they require students to provide proof of completing an English proficiency test prior to admission. CNCC has the potential to develop a competitive advantage in this regard because the college may be able to build a program that provides intense and accelerated English courses in addition to flight training.

The language training would not be exclusive to those that are entering the flight program, and there exists the opportunity to build a language center that opens the door for additional entrepreneurial activities.

For example, there are a number of online freelancing sites that aim to connect individuals and businesses with ideas, to people around the world with the skills to turn those ideas into reality. Individuals and companies post a project, and then receive bids from engineers and other professionals from around the world that are interested in completing the work. In theory these types of services work great; in reality, the low bids usually come from Asia, and the language barrier is often insurmountable.

No one has yet created a "brokerage" type service that provides language skills to allow individuals within the United States to efficiently connect to the labor force in

Asia. The proposed Asian Language Center of Excellence at CNCC would have the potential to fill this need gap, and would provide employment opportunities for students and graduates.

### Action Step 1 – Define Expertise and Conduct Feasibility Analysis

A language of expertise should be selected based on the geographic area of focus for the international flight program. A feasibility study should then be undertaken to validate and quantify the demand for "language brokerage" services.

### Action Step 2 – Build Capacity

The vocabulary necessary for complex business and engineering conversations is much different than the vocabulary taught in typical language courses. CNCC would need to introduce specialized training and courses focused on translation, and business/engineering vocabulary to help students gain the skills necessary to communicate effectively between working groups in the US and Asia.

### Action Step 3 – Create Brokerage Service Organization

It will be important to create a service organization that allows the new language experts to gain access to freelance

markets. The organization could function as either a non-profit or as a for-profit entity. The brokerage organization would actively recruit students, and students would be able to leverage the reputation of the organization for future employment opportunities.

### **#3 – DOWNTOWN REDEVELOPMENT**

Although the specifics have not yet been determined, a downtown redevelopment effort needs to be implemented in the downtown area of Rangely. Specifically, amenities that provide recreation, nightlife and retail opportunities will need to be considered. One of the most important factors to ensure the success of the downtown redevelopment strategy is to create foot traffic in the downtown core. One method of accomplishing this is to bring housing into the downtown. Medium to high density housing in conjunction to quality of life assets has the potential to revitalize the Town and bring activity to local businesses.

#### **Action Step 1 – Determine Downtown Housing Demand**

The amount of housing, and therefore the number of people living in the downtown core, will be a major driver for the success of businesses that will be co-located there. A study that identifies the number and type of housing units will provide a base from which additional amenities can be determined.

#### **Action Step 2 – Feasibility Study**

In conjunction with action step 1, a feasibility study should be conducted to determine the viability of downtown recreation and retail amenities. The goal of the feasibility study will be to right-size the development to make sure that it will be utilized and supported by the small rural community, without creating a burden to local taxpayers.

#### **Action Step 3 – Financing Plan**

It is unlikely that the development will occur without public participation. Public financing, through Rangely's RDA or additional public sources will be critical to bring the downtown development to fruition. The financing strategy will need to explore all potential sources of capital including donations, grants, and private investment.

### **#4 – CREATE LINKAGES BETWEEN CNCC AND DOWNTOWN**

The CNCC campus is disconnected from Rangely's downtown, which minimizes the impact the student population has on downtown businesses and the vibrancy of the downtown commercial corridor. Additionally, CNCC is currently over capacity in terms of student housing needs and has been looking for ways to add additional beds to meet student demand.

Consideration should be given with regards to the location and path of future development and planning efforts to



create linkages between the community anchors of CNCC and the downtown.

Additional student housing could provide a significant benefit to the community if located in the downtown. The new development would draw students and visitors alike into the downtown corridor. Quality of life assets should also be included within the new downtown development to provide students with things to do. Recreation and entertainment amenities will help students connect with the community and will create vibrancy within the downtown core.

Improvements to the trail system between the college campus and downtown would make travel more convenient for mountain biking and OHV use. A mountain bike / OHV share program could provide students with a low-cost and fun means of transportation between the college campus and downtown Rangely.

#### Action Step 1 – Explore Partnership with CNCC & WRBMRPD

The WRBMRPD could provide leadership in the development of a community focused mountain bike / OHV program and trail improvement initiative with strategic participation from CNCC and the Town of Rangely. Funding sources available to each entity should be explored to identifying means to create the capacity for program adoption and ongoing maintenance and operation.

#### Action Step 2 – Mountain Biking / OHV Trail Improvements

An assessment of trail suitability should be conducted and needed improvements identified along these key corridors. Trails should be dedicated for either mountain biking or OHV use. Grant funding should be identified and secured to make improvements including trail markings and map kiosks. Trail maps should be developed that define the routes to downtown Rangely and provided to college students.

#### Action Step 3 – Mountain Biking / OHV Ride Share / Dealer

Many urban communities have adopted bike-sharing programs that allow short-term use for community bikes at a nominal fee. A similar concept should be explored in Rangely for mountain biking and OHV's to provide students with a low-cost, convenient transportation option to downtown Rangely.

The benefits to students include cutting travel distance to downtown Rangely and providing an economic means of accessing critical amenities and services. Also, it would provide a distinct low-cost recreational opportunity not afforded by competing colleges and a unique asset that can be leveraged in recruiting student athletes and international students.

As patterns of use develop within the community and OHV demand grows, an OHV dealer should be recruited to provide purchase options for locals and visitors.

#### Action Step 4 – Path of Future Development

Future development should be tailored to take advantage of newly established patterns of travel between the college and the downtown. As growth at the college is accommodated, new housing developments and recreation/entertainment assets should follow these travel patterns and bring student housing closer to or within downtown Rangely. The mountain biking / OHV ride share program can provide the transportation infrastructure that seeds new development in closer proximity to downtown Rangely. As described above, the new student focused development will provide stronger physical and economic linkages between the student population and local businesses.

### #5 – AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE, REPAIR, AND OVERHAUL (MRO)

CNCC's aviation mechanics program and underemployed skilled workers in the local economy with welding and mechanical experience may present an opportunity to develop and sustain an MRO business at the Rangely airport. CNCC could provide oversight and "free" labor with their students to provide below market pricing for MRO services.

#### Action Step 1 – Survey College Staff and Leadership

Determine the ability of current college staff to undertake the implementation of an MRO facility and determine the best structure to move such an idea forward, giving significant consideration to a public/private partnership.

#### Action Step 2 – Feasibility Study

Collaborate with interested parties to determine whether advantages in cost or location can be achieved based on the competitive landscape of existing MRO's in the region and determine the economic feasibility of the MRO. Identify financing sources to help close gaps, as needed, to fund capital expenditures and start-up working capital.

#### Action Step 3 – Leverage Relationships to Develop Business

Should an MRO prove feasible, solicit participation of CNCC in reaching out to alumni in the aviation industry to drive business to the MRO. In addition, other plane users in the County as well as at neighboring Craig-Moffat, Rifle-Garfield, and Vernal airports should be approached to determine whether plane owners could be serviced in Rangely. Jet users within the County include Chevron and wealthy individuals in the Elk Creek Ranch development in Meeker. Ultimately, price will be the most significant driver of business to this facility.

## #6 – DATA CENTER

As described previously, electricity usage rates in Rangely are less than 50% of the national and state average, which makes Rangely a very compelling location for big electricity users, such as data centers. Although it is not the only factor, electricity costs are a major component in an operator's decision to locate a center to a particular community.

Table 5 compares electricity rates, including demand charges, for a few select locations that either host data centers, or are currently in the process of acquiring a data center. The usage estimates are based on a relatively small, 4-MW data center. It is important to note that while usage rates are important, demand charges make up a significant portion of the total bill and can sometimes outweigh the cost savings from a low usage rate.

Table 5: Estimated Monthly Electricity Costs for a 4 MW Data Center

Electricity Rates, 2014	Rate	Total Amount
<b>Lower Valley Energy (Wyoming) - Large Power Service</b>		
Demand Charge (per kW)	6.91	\$27,640
Energy Charge per (kWh)	\$0.0349	\$100,483
		\$128,123
<b>Pacific Power (Oregon) - Large Non-Residential</b>		
Demand Charge (per kW)	\$1.74	\$6,960
On-Peak Energy Charge (per kWh)	\$0.04816	\$83,220
Off-Peak Energy Charge (per kWh)	\$0.04716	\$54,328
		\$144,509
<b>Moon Lake Electric - Large Power Service</b>		
Demand Charge (per kW)	\$11.00	\$44,000
Energy Charge (per kWh)	\$0.03720	\$107,136
		\$151,136
<b>Rocky Mountain Power (Salt Lake City) - Large General Service</b>		
Facilities Charge (per kW)	\$4.71	\$18,840
Demand Charge (per kW)	\$12.88	\$51,520
Average Energy Charge (per kWh)	\$0.03963	\$114,148
		\$184,508
<b>White River Electric Association - Large Power</b>		
Demand Charge (per kW)	\$28.58	\$114,320
Energy Charge (per kWh)	\$0.0522	\$150,192
		\$264,512

Sources: Each respective electricity provider's website

As shown in the table, Rangely (via Moon Lake Electric) is in the middle of the range of the reference communities. Meeker has considerably higher electricity costs and would not likely be a competitive location unless a special deal were reached with White River Electric Association. Because Rangely is more expensive than other data center

focused areas, such as Oregon and Wyoming, additional incentives will likely be required to make up for the difference in electricity prices.

Depending on the size, a data center will likely only create five to seven new direct jobs within the community. However, a data center has the potential to create a significant number of secondary and tertiary jobs throughout the local economy. According to a recent book, *The New Geography of Jobs* by economist Enrico Moretti, the technology industry has a higher employment multiplier than every other industry. For example, each new technology/innovation job that enters a community typically creates an additional five jobs in the services economy. That impact is more than double the impact of creating a new manufacturing job (see Table 6).

Table 6: Employment Multiplier Comparison

Industry	New Jobs	Multiplier	Indirect Jobs Added	Total Job Creation
Manufacturing	5	1.6	8	13
High-Tech	5	5	25	30

Source: *The New Geography of Jobs* by Enrico Moretti

New indirect jobs created from the addition of high-tech jobs include highly skilled occupations such as doctors, nurses and teachers, and also unskilled labor such as construction, food service, and retail.

### Action Step 1 – Feasibility Study

A feasibility study needs to be conducted to identify an appropriate location, and then verify that Moon Lake Electric has the capacity to supply reliable and consistent electricity in the volume required for the data center in that location. Downtime is extremely costly for data centers, and therefore they require a reliable primary electricity source and redundant backup power systems in order to meet uptime requirements. Natural gas is typically the backup energy source of choice, which should be an advantage due to the abundant natural gas resources, infrastructure, and favorable prices in Rangely. The feasibility study will also include surveying fiber connectivity at the site to ensure redundant network access.

### Action Step 2 – Operator Recruitment and Business Development

Running and maintaining a data center is a highly complex operation and requires specialized skills and expertise. Whereas the data center will be a first for the community, it will be necessary to recruit individuals and/or companies with the knowledge and skills to make the center successful.

The selected operator will develop a business model to verify feasibility and attract clients. There may be an opportunity to secure contracts with the State of Colorado to house agency data. State contracts would be beneficial

for the data center, and may help attract support from the State legislature.

#### Action Step 3 – Financing Plan

The data center will likely have an initial price tag in the range of \$4-8 million, and will require substantial public investment to be successful. Action step 3 will identify sources of capital that can be used to supplement private investment in the center.

#### Action Step 4 – Long-term Education Initiatives

Recruiting outside labor to run the data center should be viewed as a short-term option. The long-term goal should be training the youth of the community to be qualified to work at the data center, and in additional high-tech positions that will likely come as a result of the center. To accomplish this, a partnership should be explored between the data center operator and the Rangely School District to ensure that the schools are teaching the skills that would be important for future high-tech industry positions. Other districts throughout the country have implemented similar programs and are now placing students right out of high school into highly paid software engineering positions. There are curriculum programs available that could be implemented immediately through providers such as CodeHS and Code.org.

## #7 – OUTDOOR RECREATION

The Town of Rangely has the potential to build out the current outdoor recreation offerings to improve quality of life for current and prospective residents. Specific recreational opportunities available in the area include OHV trails, mountain biking, river rafting, boating, and hiking.

#### Action Step 1 – Outdoor Recreation Audit

An in-depth, 3<sup>rd</sup> party audit should be conducted that compares outdoor recreation offerings in Rangely to those available throughout the region. The goal of this audit will be to identify specific assets that are both truly unique to Rangely, and that have the potential to improve quality of life and attract additional visitors.

#### Action Step 2 - Focused Development

Development efforts should be shifted to focus on the assets identified in the audit. There are many projects and trails that the town has identified as potential development areas, but focusing on all of them may spread the available resources too thin. Additional state and federal grants should be pursued to catalyze development

#### Action Step 3 – Leverage the Rock Crawling Park

A significant PR push should be coordinated with one of the major Rock Crawling Park activities to educate attendees of the additional recreational opportunities that are available in the region.

## SWOT – TOWN OF MEEKER

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This strength, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis for the Town of Meeker considers only those drivers within the local economy that are considered highly impactful. Although a more extensive and comprehensive SWOT list would highlight additional elements, these have been deemed insufficient to drive economic change within the local economy and as such are excluded for the purposes of this analysis.

### STRENGTHS – TOWN OF MEEKER

In addition to the assets and strengths mentioned previously, the Town of Meeker has a well-defined street grid and historically significant buildings along Main Street that creates a unique sense of place and character. The Town also benefits from the surrounding agricultural industry and has a rich heritage of cattle and sheep ranching with many of these ranches having been passed down from generation to generation. Some second or third generation ranchers have other occupations and lease their land to third-party operators.

The Meeker region is well known for hunting, being the nearest town to favorable hunting access to the nearby Flat Tops Wilderness Area (“Flat Tops”), a designated and protected area within the Routt National Forest and the White River National Forest. Flat Tops is home to one of the largest Elk Herds in North America, the White River Herd.

During hunting season the region attracts a significant number of hunters to public lands and others who pay top dollar to stay and hunt on one of the various private elk ranches in the Meeker area.

Meeker is also home to manufacturing and service businesses in the recreational hunting industry, including Headhunter Bow Strings, Rocky Mountain Bow Strings, Antler Taxidermy, and various hunting outfitters. Meeker is unique in that it produces more bowstrings than any other city in the nation.

The ERBMRPD has developed the Meeker Recreation Center, which is highly regarded and has become a source of pride for Meeker residents. The facility boasts an aquatic area, water slides, and exercise rooms and is co-located with the Meeker School District baseball fields. The ERBMRPD has expressed interest in coordinating with the Town and County on future economic development efforts.

Meeker also hosts the Sheepdog Championship Trials, which brings in a few hundred people for an average stay of three days. This event benefits local businesses and hoteliers by providing a weekend of steady and predictable revenue.

Meeker also has an airport that is owned and operated by the County. The airport accommodates hunters and fisherman flying into the area as well as wealthy individuals with second homes in the Elk Creek Ranch development.

The Eastern Rio Blanco County Health Service District is wrapping up construction of the Pioneers Medical Center, a

new hospital development to the east of Town that spurred the annexation of over 1,000 acres of land, doubling the Town's geographic size. The County made a significant investment to run the necessary infrastructure out to the site, which has created hundreds of acres of developable land with access to utilities.

Meeker is also home to the White River Electric Association (WREA), a local utility cooperative that provides service to Meeker and surrounding areas. The WREA has expressed interest in coordinating with the Town and County on economic development efforts.

Conservative financial management combined with tax revenues generated during the last oil & gas boom has provided many of the special service districts and County with funding surpluses.

## **WEAKNESSES – TOWN OF MEEKER**

Meeker's location is removed from I-70 and doesn't benefit from proximity to major transportation corridors. The Town's remote location, small population, and lack of amenities are a disadvantage with respect to attracting and retaining businesses and a skilled workforce.

Meeker's economy is also largely dependent on the oil and gas industry. This industry concentration leaves it susceptible to large employment and population fluctuations during boom and bust cycles, similar to the Town of Rangely.

Besides the fishing and hunting assets and Sheepdog Trials, which drive seasonal or periodic tourism, there are no year-round regional attractions that have been developed in the Town or surrounding region. As such, hoteliers that had previously relied on the oil & gas industry now struggle to fill their hotels.

Funding for the Meeker School District has seen significant contraction due to the recent decline in the oil & gas industry and the mechanism employed by the State of Colorado to allocate school funding across the State. A recent mill tax levy was proposed to fill this financing gap, but was not approved by voters. School funding gaps or inadequate fiscal management, if not appropriately addressed, can negatively impact school performance, quality of life, and the ability to attract and retain businesses and a skilled workforce.

The Meeker School District is currently meeting state expectations in all categories, except Academic Growth Gaps, but that trend could change if the funding gap is not alleviated.



Table 7: Meeker School District Performance

Meeker RE1		
Performance Indicators	Rating	% of Points Earned
Academic Achievement	Meets	72.2%
Academic Growth	Meets	64.5%
Academic Growth Gaps	Approaching	50.6%
College & Workforce Readiness	Meets	85.7%
Test Participation (95% Expectation)	Meets	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>Accredited</b>	<b>71.0%</b>

Source: CO Dept. of Education, District Performance Framework 2014

As described in the Meeker Asset Inventory section of this report, the highway, Main Street, and the river run in parallel with each other, but no pedestrian or development corridors exist that connect these three assets. As such, the Main Street businesses suffer from an inability to draw people into the historic corridor. Because the highway lacks a controlled intersection, pedestrian access to the river is inhibited.

There are not any licensed childcare providers in Meeker, which is a significant impediment to the community. Access to licensed and high quality childcare facilities is vital when it comes to recruiting new potential employers in the current economic environment. A greater percentage of households throughout the country are relying upon multiple income earners, which is nearly impossible without sufficient childcare facilities.

## OPPORTUNITIES – TOWN OF MEEKER

Developing amenities along the river and creating walkable pedestrian corridors from downtown to the river will allow the community to leverage this natural amenity and provide an additional quality of life asset to residents and visitors alike. These improvements should be coupled with additional private investment and redevelopment.

The new Pioneers Medical Center and surrounding developable acreage present an opportunity to create an age-in-place community. This should be patterned after similar successful developments in other rural communities.

Close proximity to great hunting assets should be leveraged by the Town to expand its shooting sport industry.

The bowstring manufacturers engineering capabilities can also be leveraged to provide entrepreneurs within the Town, County, and region with access to knowledge resources for production design.

Shooting sport amenities should also be considered as a way to attract and capture additional disposable income from visiting hunters as well as provide residents with a quality of life asset.

The presence of cattle and sheep ranching operations provide demand for a USDA certified meat-processing plant. A local business has expressed interest in developing

and operating the plant, which will provide value-added food production with steady wages and opportunities for additional expansion in other food production areas such as poultry.

A culinary arts school concept has received support among many members of the community. CNCC had been approached about establishing a teaching facility in Meeker but had indicated there was insufficient local demand to warrant the investment.

Community development assets such as a movie theater, bowling alley, family fun center, and child daycare were common themes in interviews with community stakeholders. Another opportunity mentioned was the presence of hot springs just outside the Town that could be re-established and promoted as a tourist attraction.

### **THREATS – TOWN OF MEEKER**

The Town's industry concentration in oil & gas is the largest external threat the local economy faces as the oil and gas industry is subject to global price fluctuations in the oil & gas market. A decline in demand or oversupply of oil & gas will result in producers restricting supply to existing production assets that operate at low break-even points and cutting back exploration. Local employment is largely dependent on these external forces.

The health and population of the White River Elk Herd determines the number of hunting licenses issued and the

resulting influx of hunters to Meeker during the hunting season. A rapid decline in the population due to a severe winter a number of years ago resulted in a significant drop in hunting licenses being issued.

Restrictions on the imposition of taxes through the TABOR and Gallagher Amendment have limited the ability of local districts to cover funding shortfalls. In addition, the State of Colorado public school funding mechanism was designed by legislators to take funding from affluent school districts and re-distribute it to low-income districts. Many rural communities along the Western Slope have faced significant funding gaps due to these policies.

This has resulted in additional mill levy taxes being imposed by local districts to cover funding shortfalls. In instances where mill levies are not approved by voters, such as in Meeker, funding gaps continue to exist and other avenues must be pursued to close the gap, ultimately resulting in service reductions to district students.

## RECOMMENDATIONS – TOWN OF MEEKER

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### #1 – STRATEGIC REDEVELOPMENT

Strategic redevelopment should be focused on eliminating blight, creating entryways to the Town, expanding the downtown, and interconnecting the White River with Market Street and Main Street. This strategy will provide the community with corridors that leverage the community's natural beauty. The first corridor project should focus on developing a downtown gateway on Market Street with a corridor that extends north to Main Street and south to the river.

Redevelopment along this corridor should be focused on the two blocks on either side of 5<sup>th</sup> Street between Market and Water Streets and be comprised of entertainment and recreation uses. These uses could include a movie theater (with a community theater), bowling alley, family fun center, grocery store, high-end restaurant, and culinary arts center. A childcare center could be incorporated into the development to accommodate parental date nights and the day care needs of the local workforce as described previously in this report.

#### Action Step 1 – Project Pre-development

Funding should be secured for pre-development activities. These include market feasibility, corridor planning,

environmental studies, land assemblage, and option contract consideration.

While determining project feasibility, private sector businesses with development and operational experience in the proposed uses should be surveyed. Their input regarding the levels of private participation that could be supported provided local market conditions should be used to develop financing assumptions. A capital stack should then be developed to identify funding sources and public private participation levels. Gap financing needs should be identified and preliminary public incentives and investment commitments secured.

Private sector businesses with development and operational experience in the proposed uses should be recruited to invest in the project and assume operational risk. Preliminary agreement should be reached on the levels of public and private investment required to meet required investor returns.

Funding sources should then be secured, development and interlocal agreements executed, and architectural and design work completed and approved.

#### Action Step 2 – Corridor Improvements

Corridor improvements should be incorporated into the project plan and financing secured. These improvements should include the streetscape, right of way, and a controlled intersection.

The streetscape and right of way should be designed with sufficient width to accommodate pedestrians, bikes, parking, landscaping, on-street dining, and lamp lighting. The design should encourage pedestrian activity and vibrancy along the corridor. Ultimately, the corridor should serve as a gateway to historic Main Street.

A controlled intersection within the redevelopment corridor along Market Street should be developed with financing secured through the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT). This will serve two purposes: 1) to allow pedestrians to safely cross Market Street, and 2) to stop through traffic in Meeker. Stopping traffic at this beautified corridor will encourage travelers to park and explore. The town leadership previously petitioned CDOT for the permission to create a controlled intersection, but CDOT turned down the proposal. A renewed strategic approach paired with a development project should provide the momentum to acquire the necessary approvals.

#### Action Step 3 – Business Improvement District

A business improvement district (BID) should be established with local businesses. BID's are separate non-profit legal entities dedicated to assisting businesses with improving and maintaining infrastructure, recruiting businesses to the area and putting on events to draw people to the area. Funding comes through funding for the geographic district outlined by the business community.

## #2 – RIVER CORRIDOR, AMENITIES, & EVENTS

The redevelopment plan mentioned above should be combined with the development of a public riverfront park and recreation area stretching from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Street. These developments should happen in parallel.

The riverfront park should include a river trail, gazebos, picnic tables, fishing areas, kayaking, and tubing. Street terminations from 1<sup>st</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Street should be improved to beautify access points to the park.

#### Action Step 1 – Strategic Partnerships

The ERBMRPD is already exploring this concept along the river and have retained a design firm to develop preliminary plans. The County, Town, and ERBMRPD should coordinate planning efforts to incorporate and integrate planned improvements along the river with the downtown redevelopment opportunities identified above.

Pre-development roles, funding participation levels and commitments should be decided upon and secured from each public entity.

#### Action Step 2 - Assemblage

As with any redevelopment project, existing properties should be secured using option contracts. This provides the purchaser with the right to purchase rather than an

obligation to do so. Option contracts should be executed only when all property owners have agreed to sell. This minimizes risks associated with holdouts and places pressure on owners to participate together in a community minded manner. In some instances, owners may want to be relocated to similar property and those needs should be accommodated.

### Action Step 3 - Financing

Grant funding should be solicited from Federal and State sources to fund as much of the riverfront improvements as possible. Donations from wealthy individuals, non-profit conservation and habitat protection groups, and others should be solicited and secured. The project would also be an ideal candidate for a GOCO Grant.

Maintenance and improvement costs should be determined and sources for ongoing revenue identified to maintain the park.

### Action Step 4 – River Events

River events should be organized and held to attract additional visitors into the community. Effective planning of river amenities and walkable corridors will encourage visitors to recreate along the river, be entertained along Market Street, stay at local hotels, and patronize the local businesses along Main Street.



### Action Step 5 - Riverfront Re-development

The anchor redevelopment project and riverfront park mentioned above under recommendations #1 and #2, respectively, will catalyze additional private investment. These recreation and entertainment assets should be leveraged to redevelop additional blocks along Market Street that incorporate pedestrian friendly corridors between Main Street and the river. Although the final form of the project may vary, a basic concept for how recommendations #1 and #2 can fit together is shown in Figure 4.

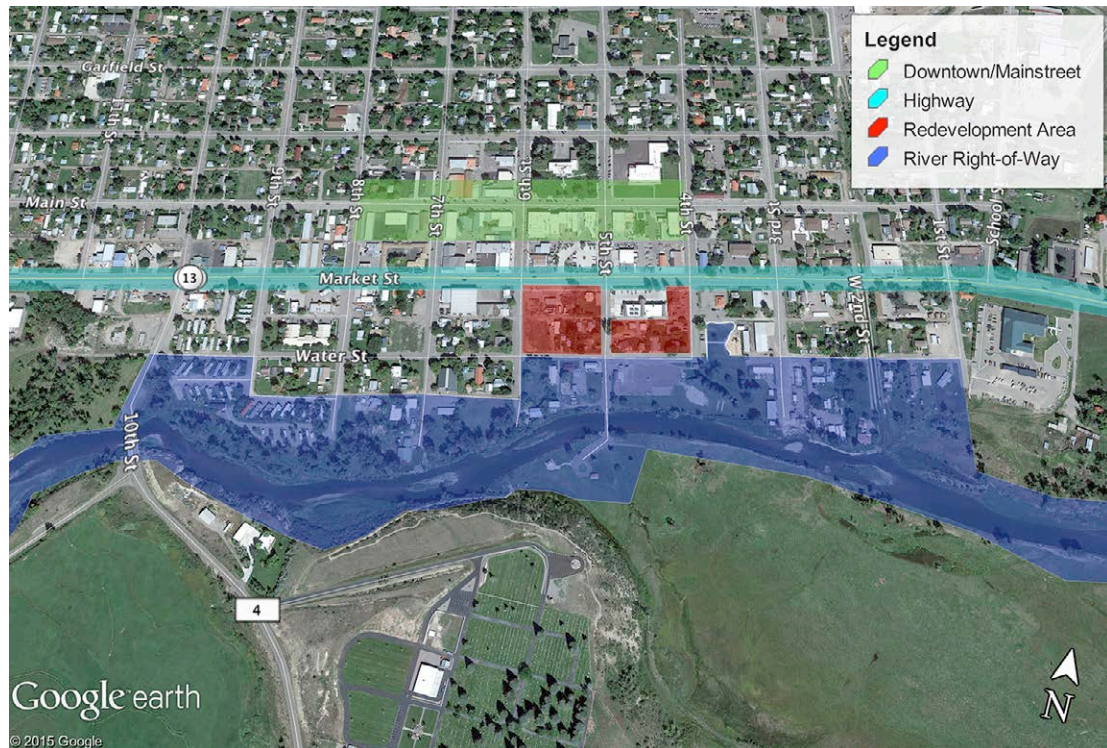


Figure 4: Redevelopment Concept Map

### #3 – RECREATION MECCA

Meeker has the potential to become a recreation mecca on the Western Slope, and possibly for all of Colorado. Boulder, Colorado has long been the benchmark for outdoor recreation enthusiasts, and Meeker has the capacity to meet, and in some cases, exceed that benchmark.

Once the corridor and entertainment amenities are developed near the river, over 90% of the population of Meeker will be within one mile, or a six-minute bike ride from a world class fishing spot with beautiful scenery and wonderful entertainment amenities. Additionally, over 90% of the population is within one mile, or a six-minute bike ride from trailheads that access the scenic mountains.

In Boulder, much of the population is between three and five miles, or a seventeen to thirty minute bike ride away from the mountain trails, and an even greater distance away from the water recreation assets. Additionally, the streets of Boulder are much more congested with traffic than Meeker, and commute times can stretch even longer during busy times of the day.

The town-owned property west of town and north of Highway 13, also referred to as Ute Park, is an underdeveloped area that could be turned into a significant recreation asset. Ute Park is used to host the Meeker Classic Sheepdog Championship Trials each year, but the rest of the year it is used as pasture ground for cattle. The 126-acre parcel would be an ideal location for family recreation

activities such as athletic fields, remote controlled (RC) plane and helicopter flying fields, model rocket launching grounds, a ropes course and many other potential uses. These types of activities require a lot of open space without obstructions such as trees and buildings, and this site could be a unique and beautiful location that could accommodate all of these uses.

The capped-off hot spring near town is a historical asset that could be explored as part of the recreation mecca concept. The spring was capped off primarily due to environmental concerns. However, these issues could most likely be resolved with additional investment. The opportunity by itself may not have the traction to warrant investment and a re-opening, but it may work if it is paired with the other recreational components mentioned herein.

#### Action Step 1 – Recreation Master Plan Update

The recreation master plan should be updated to include all of the elements discussed herein. The master plan should place priority on the river concept mentioned in recommendation #2, but should include future phases that will incorporate family recreation facilities at Ute Park.

#### Action Step 2 – Leverage Outdoor Recreation Assets to Attract Employers

Family recreation is an important element when it comes to recruiting new businesses and employees for those



businesses to a community. With all of the family friendly recreation elements described above, Meeker will be in a powerful position to recruit employers and entrepreneurs.

### Action Step 3 – Outdoor Family Fun Festival

To our knowledge, the only “family fun” focused festival in Colorado is the Rocky Mountain PBS Fun Fest held in Denver each fall. A committee should be organized to explore the possibility of hosting an outdoor family fun festival in Meeker. Meeker would be able to offer a unique experience that is far superior to what is possible in a downtown urban environment such as Denver. Activities for all age groups could be held at the many parks throughout the community, and adults could go on guided fishing trips in town, or up-river. The impact of such a festival would extend far beyond the event itself, and will provide exposure to help recruit additional tourists and employers.

## #4 – MEAT PROCESSING PLANT

A local meat distribution company has experienced significant growth and has expressed interest in the development and operation of a meat processing plant.

### Action Step 1 – Business Plan and Pro-Forma

The company should work with the SBDC to develop a business plan and pro-forma for the new operation. Identification of pre-development, construction, and certification costs should be calculated. The CSU-Extension should also be approached about performing a feasibility study on the proposed project.

### Action Step 2 – Secure Incentives & Bank Financing

Grants, loans, and other incentives through USDA should be secured to help finance the project. USDA Business & Industry (B&I) approved lenders should be approached to lend on the project. The owners indicated that they would sign personal guarantees.

The project would also be a good fit for the USDA Rural Economic Development Loan & Grant Program (REDLG), which would require a local telecomm or utility provider to act as a funding intermediary. WREA expressed interest and may participate provided it makes good business sense.

## #5 – CULINARY ARTS SCHOOL BRANCH CAMPUS

The development of a riverfront park along with entertainment and recreation assets should be leveraged to recruit a culinary arts extension to the proposed redevelopment project recommended above.

An established culinary arts institute could operate the extension. Another option would be to partner with existing institutes to provide their students with short (1 to 2 weeks) experiential learning courses focused on a “farm-to-table” experience. The extension would have a niche focus on educating students on ranch-to-table and river-to-table supply chains, meat production standards, and sustainable ranching and fishing.

#### Action Step 1 – Recruitment

There are a number of art institutes that have branch campuses across the country. These include:

- The Art Institutes with 52 locations, the nearest location being in Denver;
- Le Cordon Bleu with 16 campus locations;
- International Culinary Center with locations in New York City and Silicon Valley;
- Culinary Institute of America with campus locations in New York, Napa Valley, and San Antonio;

There are various other schools that should also be approached to gauge their interest in participating.

#### Action Step 2 – Strategic Location

The culinary arts extension should be located in the redevelopment area and provide room demand for local

hotels, access for students to the surrounding entertainment and recreation assets, and vibrancy to the corridor.

#### Action Step 3 – Funding Sources

Grant and loan incentives for the project could be secured through the USDA REDLG program. The program provides grant and loan funding for facilities and equipment to provide education and training to residents of rural areas that will facilitate economic development. It also provides funding for projects that utilize advanced telecommunications or computer networks to facilitate medical or educational services or job training.

Grants under this program are repaid to the financing intermediary and create a revolving loan fund that can be used for financing other small businesses.

#### Action Step 4 – Regional Partnerships

In order to provide a true farm-to-table education, the Meeker campus should partner with communities such as Paonia, a community with a burgeoning organic farming industry with various crops and fruits. Students could split their time between Meeker and Paonia.

#### Action Step 5 – High-End Restaurant

The establishment of the culinary arts extension should be leveraged to create a high-end restaurant run by students that caters to wealthy customers. The restaurant would have riverfront views and be open during certain times of the year to maintain an exclusive clientele. The restaurant would help with positioning the culinary school as well as branding the community.

#### Action Step 6 – Colorado Creative District

The culinary arts opportunity should be leveraged with the community theater (as part of the movie theater project), Antler Taxidermy, and other local artists to seek designation of the downtown as a creative district with the State of Colorado. This designation provides loan funds to help expand, enhance, and strengthen creative assets within the district.

### #6 - SHOOTING SPORTS CLUSTER EXPANSION

As previously mentioned, Meeker manufactures more bow strings than any other city in the nation. Its proximity to wildlife recreation positions the community to leverage these existing assets to grow its shooting sports cluster.

#### Action Step 1 – Bow Manufacturer Recruiting

There are approximately twenty-two bow manufacturers with operations in various parts of the country. Relocation incentives and a recruiting strategy should be developed to approach each manufacturer regarding their interest in relocating to Meeker.

Industry events should also be attended to market the community to businesses. Marketing spreads in industry publications should also be pursued.

#### Action Step 2 – Shooting Sports Amenities

As most hunters check their scoping accuracy and practice targeting prior to hunting, world-class shooting ranges should be developed. This will position the Town as a preferred hunting destination and capture additional disposable income of visiting hunters. This facility should be located in close proximity to downtown so as to encourage visitors to stop and explore.

#### Action Step 3 – Shooting Sport Expansion

Additional businesses in the shooting sports industry should be pursued in addition to bow manufacturing. This shift in focus should happen after a few new businesses within the cluster have relocated to the community. This creates a sense of momentum and critical mass that

provides a compelling story for other businesses in related cluster areas to consider relocation to Meeker.

## **#7 – INNOVATION CENTER**

One of the most difficult aspects of starting a new business is securing access to the expertise and the resources that are necessary to launch a new product or idea. Even though the United States is seen as a prime location for innovation, there are surprisingly few resources available that provide a true “one-stop-shop” to help entrepreneurs, and even existing businesses get their ideas off the ground.

Along the Western Slope of Colorado, several communities are exploring a new type of innovation center concept that is focused on filling the need gap described above to help products go from concept to prototype. However, an additional piece of the continuum is necessary... going from prototype to low to moderate volume manufacturing.

Most currently available manufacturing equipment is too expensive for startup companies, and is often too rigid to be modified as a new product goes through development iterations. The bowstring manufacturers in Meeker have already done this internally, taking inexpensive off-the-shelf parts, and creating some of the most precise manufacturing equipment in the world. This is a unique skill that could be leveraged to fit in nicely with innovation centers being pursued throughout the region.

### **Action Step 1 – Determine Engineering Capabilities**

Discussions with local firms should be conducted to determine the extent of their engineering capabilities and interest in participating in an engineering innovation center.

### **Action Step 2 – Strategic Partnerships**

The innovation center should be coupled with the entrepreneur ecosystem along the Western Slope so referrals to the center are coming from outside the community. In addition, the center should be operated by the private sector so it is focused on bringing profitable products to market.

### **Action Step 3 - Define Core Competency**

The innovation center should define its core competency and focus on doing one thing really well. Entrepreneurs will be more likely to utilize the innovation center if it is specialized in one area, which it does better than any other center in the region or State.

## **#8 – AGE-IN-PLACE RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES**

The new Pioneers Medical Center and surrounding developable acreage present an opportunity to create an

age-in-place community. This should be patterned after successful developments in rural communities.

catalyze private investment. Enter into a development agreement with the developer.

#### Action Step 1 – Assess Demand

A feasibility study should be conducted for the region and broader market to assess demand for an age-in-place community in Meeker next to the hospital. The study should identify product types, construction cost, and profitability.

#### Action Step 2 – Attract Developer

Concurrent with Step 1, have discussions with local landowners regarding willingness to sell or participate as an equity partner in the development. Determine willingness of the hospital district to participate in the project. Depending on the level of hospital district involvement, recruit a developer that has experience in building out age-in-place communities. The developer chosen should have experience in working in rural communities and strong marketing capabilities to attract residents from outside the area.

#### Action Step 3 – Public Private Investment

Work with the developer to determine infrastructure needs for the development and the public investment needed to

## RECOMMENDATIONS – RIO BLANCO COUNTY

### NATURAL GAS POWER PLANT

Rio Blanco County is ideally positioned for a natural gas power plant due its proximity to abundant natural gas supply and high-voltage transmission lines (see Figure 5). Recruiting a natural gas power plant to the county will be a tremendous undertaking, but it has the potential to be a true legacy project that will benefit the county for generations to come. The effort should originate, and should be driven by Rio Blanco County leadership due to the size and scope of the project.

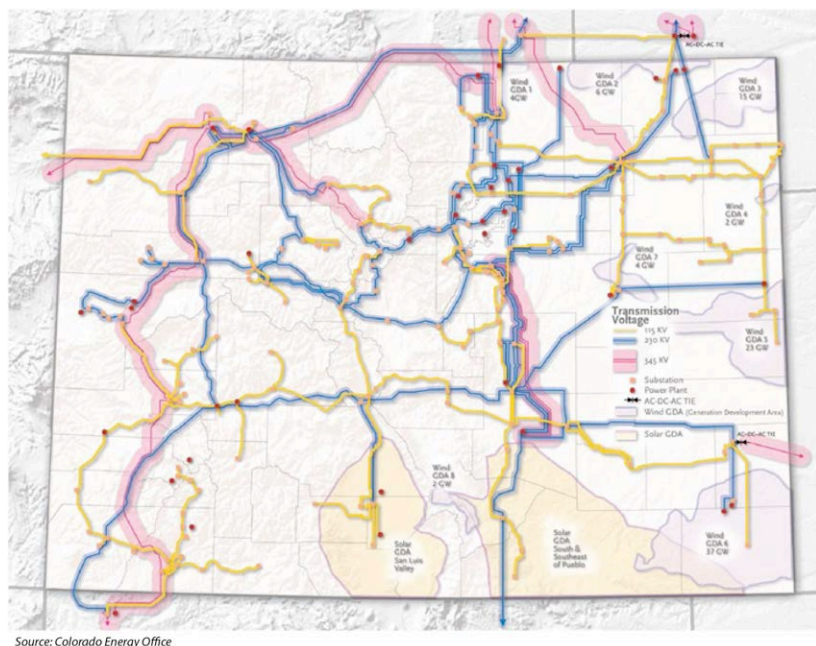


Figure 5: Transmission Lines in Colorado

The US Energy Information Administration estimates a new 400 MW Advanced Generation natural gas plant will cost approximately \$409 million. Based on other similarly sized projects, such as the Langelly Gulch gas power plant in Idaho, the project will likely create more than 100 jobs during the construction phase, and approximately 15-20 permanent jobs over the life of the plant. Although the number of ongoing jobs is relatively small, the new jobs will be high paying and stable positions. A project of this size will take multiple years to plan and carry out, so it will be important to begin discussions as quickly as possible.

From an initial analysis, a site near Meeker may require less investment due to its position near existing high voltage transmission lines. According to a recent report from the Western Electricity Coordinating Council, the cost of constructing a new high voltage double circuit transmission line (345 kV) is greater than \$2 million per mile. The construction cost of new transmission lines may preclude Rangely as a possible site because the closest distance to tie into another high voltage line would be at least 10 miles. That distance would require an additional \$20 million in capital costs that could be avoided by choosing to locate near Meeker. However, it may be possible to structure other incentives near Rangely that would make up for the additional \$20 million in infrastructure investment.

It is important to note that a new power plant would benefit both communities, no matter where it is located within the county. The goal should be to select a site that



has the best potential to gain traction and attract investment.

### Action Step 1 – Pre-development

Pre-development efforts will include identifying which partners and potential operators would be most likely to locate to Rio Blanco County, and validating the interest that these operators would have in an additional power plant within their network. These conversations should also be used to assess infrastructure requirements (transmission capacity, water rights and natural gas supply availability) to make sure that Rio Blanco County has the potential to compete on a regional level.

### Action Step 2 – Feasibility Analysis

Due to the size and scope of the project, a national consulting firm that specializes in new power plant construction should be hired to conduct a feasibility study for Rio Blanco County. At minimum, the study and analysis should address the following topics:

- Infrastructure requirements
- Demand analysis
- Capital improvement estimates
- Off-site construction requirements
- Site recommendations
- Environmental impact study

- Economic impact study (looking specifically at job creation and property tax increment)
- Operator recruitment strategy
- Incentive strategy and financing plan
- Multi-phase project schedule

A firm such as NERA Economic Consultants should be able to provide the required consulting services.

### Action Step 3 – Political Strategy

Armed with the results of the feasibility study, County leadership should begin “pounding the pavement” to recruit and attract interest in the power plant. It will require meeting with state officials to get the necessary approvals, and also meeting with local citizens to help them understand the benefits. Many citizens will likely express concerns of environmental impact, and quality of life impacts. Therefore, it will be important to have data from the feasibility analysis in hand to provide facts to questions and alleviate potential concerns.

The County should also begin strategizing on how to create an incentive package necessary to compete on a regional, and possibly a national level. Due to the national scale of the electricity grid, power plant operators have some flexibility on where to locate a generation facility, granted the site has access to transmission lines. Therefore, Rio Blanco County is competing with the rest of Colorado, and the Western United States as a potential site. The county



should be aggressive in assembling an incentive package and actively recruiting potential operators.

## ADDITIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

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Each of the parties mentioned above in the various recommendations and actions steps are crucial stakeholders in the process of developing and implementing the redevelopment plans. In addition to those mentioned above, there are a number of influential individuals in each community that will be important partners in moving forward.

### RANGELY

The Town of Rangely hosts several self-made millionaires that are deeply interested in the success of the community. These individuals made their money by building and growing companies within the oil industry and have had at least one, and sometimes several successful exits. Bud and June Striegel are two of these individuals that are focused on sharing their wealth and experience for the benefit of the community. This duo has already engaged in a number of development projects including a waterfall and a soon to open classic car museum.

Mayor Frank Huitt also fits in this category not only because of his position as Mayor, but also in his love for the community and access to resources.

These individuals, and a few others, have already invested significant amounts of personal money to improve the community, but collectively the impact could be much greater. This group of individuals should be approached strategically with the opportunity to participate in the development projects described above with a clear vision of how their participation will enable the project to move forward successfully. Their participation may help influence others, such as Chevron, to invest in projects that otherwise would be overlooked by the large corporations in the area.

### MEEKER

Similar to Rangely, Meeker is home to several successful former executives and entrepreneurs that have business knowledge, financial resources and connections that can be leveraged not only in redevelopment projects, but also in the recruitment and startup of the new industries mentioned above. In particular, the individuals residing up-river in areas such as the Elk Creek Ranch should be viewed as a tremendous sleeping asset that can be awakened with the opportunity to participate in the right project.

There are several individuals within the community that have strong connections with the wealthy and educated class up-river, but also have a great love and desire to help the Town of Meeker. These individuals should be involved in the planning stages of potential development projects to

determine which projects would receive the most support from the up-river communities.

## DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

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There are numerous development agencies and programs available to assist in the redevelopment of the downtown regions of both Rangely and Meeker. Some of these programs offer strengths and capabilities that can be leveraged simultaneously to maximize the potential impact. The core competencies, as well as potential for collaboration will be outlined below.

### SBDC

The Grand Junction Small Business Development Center (SBDC) services Rio Blanco County. While the majority of the programs and initiatives are focused in Mesa County, the center has recently started hosting seminars and workshops in Rangely and Meeker. These seminars are excellent tools for new and potential business owners and should continue with full support of the community and the Chamber of Commerce. In addition to very small businesses and new startups, the resources at the SBC can and should be leveraged by larger organizations within the community. The Small Business Administration (SBA), which manages the SBDC program, typically defines a small business as having less than 500 employees. Most of the employers in

Rio Blanco County fit that description, and thus will qualify for the help, support, and many of the grants administered through the SBDC and the SBA.

Many of the mid-sized employers in the County are not aware that they qualify for this assistance, which is an area where the SBDC and the respective Chambers could work together to identify mid-sized businesses with the most potential to scale, keeping in mind that some of these companies may not be current Chamber members. Once the Chamber has identified and provided the names of these businesses, the SBDC can help provide assistance in growth strategies and can also help identify and secure financing resources to carry out the strategy. Education will have to be done to teach local mid-sized businesses (such as the bowstring manufacturers in Meeker) about the resources that are available and the advantages of working with the SBDC. Most employers in this size category may feel like the SBDC has little to offer because the centers typically focus on small startups, but there are many examples of larger companies receiving assistance to grow. Julie Morey at the SBDC has expressed interest in coordinating with the Chambers in this regard and will be a great asset to local business owners.

Another service offered by the SBDC is the community “Economic Gardening” program. This service has a one-time fee of \$175, but it gives members access to state personnel and professionals that have powerful market research and data mining tools. The program will be a

perfect fit for companies that are trying to expand into new markets.

## CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE

The greatest asset that each Chamber of Commerce has is their network of businesses and business minded individuals throughout the community. Many of these individuals, particularly in Rangely, have built very successful companies that were subsequently acquired by larger organizations for a substantial profit. Many of these individuals are now retired, but have a vast wealth of knowledge of how to start and grow a business in a rural community. Some of the skill sets will be different based on the type of business, but the general business skills of the successful businesses can be greater leveraged to assist those that are starting out or looking to grow. In this regard, there exists the potential for a natural partnership between the Chambers and the SBDC.

For example, the Chamber may recommend a company to go to the SBDC for help conducting marketing research to expand into additional markets. Once the Chamber and the SBDC are united in assisting the same companies, the Chamber can leverage its network to connect the company and the SBDC with a mentor from the area that could provide help and coaching. With the right opportunity and the right plan, this may be a program that could entice some of the retired executives from the Elk Creek Ranch

development to participate in the mentorship program and become more active in the local economy.

Another area for collaboration between the SBDC and the Chambers is in gathering local, real-time business and demographic data. DOLA and various other state and federal agencies gather demographic and business data on a regular basis, but it is often a challenge to drill down into the information deep enough to make meaningful and educated decisions on the local level. In this regard, the Chambers can work with the SBDC to inform them of real-time changes in the new and existing businesses (such as number of employees, relevant industries (NAICS Codes), job openings, and gaps in the marketplace. Ultimately, this knowledge will help the SBDC identify opportunities for additional small businesses that will help fill the market gaps and resources can be funneled toward emerging opportunities. Gathering the data is time intensive, and the Chambers may need to re-allocate resources to allow someone to gather this information.

## Tasks and Timelines

### *Task 1*

Organize a coordination meeting. Responsible Party: Chambers of Commerce. Timeline: Can be scheduled immediately.

The purpose of the initial meeting will be to cast the vision of what is possible with a close collaboration between the parties, and to discuss additional opportunities for working

together and address any organizational concerns. The SBDC office is based out of Grand Junction and covers a lot of territory, thus it will be important for this effort to be led and driven by the Chambers, as it might otherwise get lost amongst the many programs and priorities of the SBDC.

#### *Task 2*

Share member and job data between the Chambers and the SBDC. Responsible Party: Chambers of Commerce. Timeline: Task should begin within two weeks of the organization meeting. Some elements of the task can be completed within a few weeks, while other elements, such as data collection, will be ongoing.

Based on the outcome of the initial planning meeting, Chamber member lists should be shared with the SBDC to allow them to begin baseline job and industry tracking. Both groups should work together to identify companies that are ready to scale and that would be the best fit for SBDC coaching. Once identified, the Chamber should reach out to potential SBDC clients and discuss the potential benefits from participating in the program.

#### *Task 3*

Select one to three companies to receive individualized growth and expansion counseling from the SBDC. Responsible Party: SBDC. Timeline: Three to six months.

The number of initial companies will be driven by resource availability at the SBDC, but care should be taken not to select too many initial clients as to not spread resources too thin.

#### *Task 4*

Create public awareness. Responsible party: SBDC. Timeline: Three to six months

In addition to the targeted approach described above, this program should be discussed publicly to help identify future participants and build momentum. For example, the next round of public workshops taught by the SBDC should be focused on growing existing businesses, and all Chamber members should receive a personal invitation to attend.

### **MAIN STREET PROGRAM**

The National Main Street Program, administered locally through DOLA, is a training and education program focused on revitalizing downtowns and creating positive momentum in the redevelopment of a community. The basic concept is valuable because a town or city is typically identified and “branded” by the appearance of its downtown. However, in context of the experience that Better City has had in other communities of similar size, the methods by which the Main Street program attempts to affect change are not capable of producing the significant impacts necessary to substantially shift the economic drivers in a downtown.

For example, quoting from the National Main Street Program’s website:

“Successful revitalization programs begin with basic, simple activities that demonstrate that ‘new things are happening’ in the commercial district.”

Additionally, the major focus of the Main Street program is on visual appearance. Again, quoting from the website:

“An appealing atmosphere, created through attention to all of these visual elements, conveys a positive message about the commercial district and what it has to offer.”

In Better City’s experience, small and incremental steps like the ones described by the program is akin to a doctor treating symptoms rather than the underlying problems. In addition, small incremental projects typically cause the public to lose interest and it doesn’t lead to significant job growth.

Take for example the City of Superior, Wisconsin. Over a period of several years, the city, county, and state invested \$10 million in improving the visual appearance and infrastructure of an important downtown street with the idea that by doing so, businesses would flock to the area to be part of the movement. Several years and \$10 million later, only two businesses have located to the street: a donut shop, and a candy store. Although important, these types of businesses are not substantial enough to serve as the economic driver necessary to maintain a downtown over time. And Superior’s experience is not unique. Many other cities have implemented similar downtown beautification strategies, only to find that within ten years

or less, the downtown is in a similar state that it was before the investment was made.

The alternative approach, and the approach taken by Better City, is to focus on large and strategic projects that substantially alter the economics of the downtown. What is needed is a foundational shift in the downtown, rather than a facelift. Large projects have the potential of changing the economic drivers in a downtown, which changes the dynamics enough to create additional demand for local goods and services. As a result, local businesses are more profitable and have the resources necessary to invest in their own façade improvements.

With that in mind, there still may be a role for the Main Street program in Rio Blanco County, and specifically in Meeker. The program can be looked at as a way to maintain the positive momentum created from a large strategic project. The mini-grants awarded to Main Street participants (in the range of \$5,000 to \$10,000) are not enough to undertake foundational improvements, but are enough to make consistent improvements over time once the economics of the downtown have shifted. Therefore, the County should approach the program with the intention of it being a support system, and not a complete solution. The town leadership should be careful not be enticed into the notion that small incremental changes will produce the results necessary over time.

## VISIONARY PLANNING

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A community visioning and planning meeting was held in Meeker, Colorado on May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015. In attendance were representatives and stakeholders from the communities of Rangely and Meeker. During the meeting, topics and concepts contained in this report were presented to the group for feedback and discussion. The purpose of the meeting was to ensure that the community is involved in the planning process, and to create channels of communication to allow the community to provide the vision for their future, and ultimately is empowered to make that vision a reality. In addition to discussing the ideas and concepts described in the initial drafts of this document, the group provided additional ideas and concepts, which have subsequently been included in the final version of this report. Details regarding which additional items were added or modified will be outlined below.

### MEEKER

The community response for the projects and direction for Meeker was largely positive. The community expressed great interest and excitement in the downtown and river corridor concept. Several stakeholders provided feedback that similar concepts have been mentioned and explored in the past, but the historical political and social environment prevented substantial progress from being made. Several community members expressed the feeling that the scope

of the proposed project and the timing may provide the necessary traction to move the project forward.

The USDA certified meat processing plant concept was favorably accepted, although some expressed concern about whether there would be enough local demand to sustain a plant, given that several exiting custom meat processing plants have struggled historically. The second and third phase of Better City's strategic planning process will delve deeper into the specifics as to the ability of the market to sustain the operation. However, initial impressions regarding the matter suggest that the size, scale, and scope of the newly proposed processing center would be able to overcome the operating difficulties experienced by previous operators.

The culinary concept was received neutrally overall, with some expressing interest, while others expressing concern because the concept has been explored in the past. Better City's suggestion of partnering with existing culinary programs was received positively.

The shooting sports cluster expansion generated a lot of interest and excitement from the community members. Several in attendance did not realize the size or significance of the existing bowstring manufacturers, and expressed excitement of the possibility of leveraging the region's natural resources to expand the employment base in this cluster.

The innovation center concept was neutrally accepted, but it became apparent in the discussions that additional



information and details about these types of centers needed to be added to the report. The additional information has been included in the final version.

The group viewed the age-in-place concept favorably. The community is very proud of the new hospital, and the possibility of new growth and development in that area of town was viewed as a great opportunity. The community didn't express any apprehension regarding the growth of the retired demographic.

Additional concepts and ideas that were submitted from the group, both during the meeting and in some individual conversations afterwards, include re-opening of the hot springs east of town and a natural gas power plant. These concepts were added to the report.

## RANGELY

The group viewed the international flight program in Rangely favorably, although there was a considerable amount of concern regarding the cost of the program and the timing. The group expressed enthusiasm in recruiting additional students to CNCC and to the town that wouldn't go home on the weekends and that would contribute more to the local economy. The group discussed methods of bolstering the connection between international students and the town, such as new international student housing located in or near the downtown.

The group expressed interest in the concept regarding strengthening the linkages and trails between CNCC and downtown. It was pointed out that the Town of Rangely has already invested a significant amount of resources improving the trails and connections between the downtown and CNCC campus, although it was admitted that additional investment is needed to continue to improve the linkages.

Much like the international flight program, the group viewed the MRO proposal in Rangely with cautious optimism. Again, the concern was on funding, and the ability to mobilize CNCC resources.

Additional concepts in Rangely include a data center, a natural gas power plant, downtown redevelopment, additional outdoor recreation attention, and quality of life assets. These topics were included in the final version of this report.

## NEXT STEPS

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Looking ahead, Phase II and Phase III of the project will dive deeper into the economics of the community, to verify and validate the feasibility of the proposed projects listed in Phase I of the project.

Specifically, Phase II is an economic assessment that will look at tax collection trends, demographic trends, real estate needs, etc. to determine additional economic development needs. Focus will be placed on identifying industries that will help diversify the economy and create additional employment opportunities within the county.

Phase III will identify and analyze the industry clusters that are present in the county, and will identify opportunities to expand those clusters to create additional jobs. A few of these clusters have been mentioned in Phase I, but additional analysis is necessary to identify the best strategy to grow existing clusters and attract additional ones to the region.

Phase IV will integrate all of the phases into a cohesive plan, and will provide more details regarding the timeline and the steps necessary to implement the strategy and create real results on the ground. Each phase will build on each other to create a workable plan that has the potential to make a lasting impact on the County.

## CONCLUSION

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Rio Blanco County has experienced significant economic swings in the past, but there are a number of community strengths and assets that can be joined together to create a unique story that will seed future growth and diversification.

Within the Town of Meeker, the focus should be placed on connecting the three major physical assets (the downtown, the highway and the river) with a walkable corridor that includes recreation and entertainment elements that will drive traffic and help stabilize the existing downtown businesses. The development will help establish Meeker as a unique and beautiful place to live and build a business.

In Rangely, CNCC is a major employer and is uniquely positioned to grow its aviation program to meet the growing need of new pilots. Recruiting international students will not only benefit the college, but it will introduce new, semi-permanent residents to the community to support local businesses.

These projects serve as the core of many additional projects in each community that can work synergistically to stabilize existing companies and create opportunities for additional industries to come to the area.