

MOUNTAINS AND MEMORIES: BUILDING OPPORTUNITY FROM WITHIN



MOUNTAINS

Written by Vicki Damon

Nestled high in Colorado's Rocky Mountains, Summit County is known the world over for its powder-white slopes and summer hiking that rivals some of the best trails in the country. But beneath the postcard-perfect scenery, local leaders and residents alike are wrestling with a surprising truth: the very strengths that make Summit County beloved also bring limits and urgent questions about what comes next.

"The work is here," says Cheri Ryan, Executive Director of the [Summit Chamber of Commerce](#), capturing both the optimism and the challenge facing this mountain community. But the kind of work and the type of economy that supports it is shifting. From workforce housing to talent pipelines, and from tourism's seasonal peaks to hopes for diversification, leaders are reimagining Summit County's economic future.



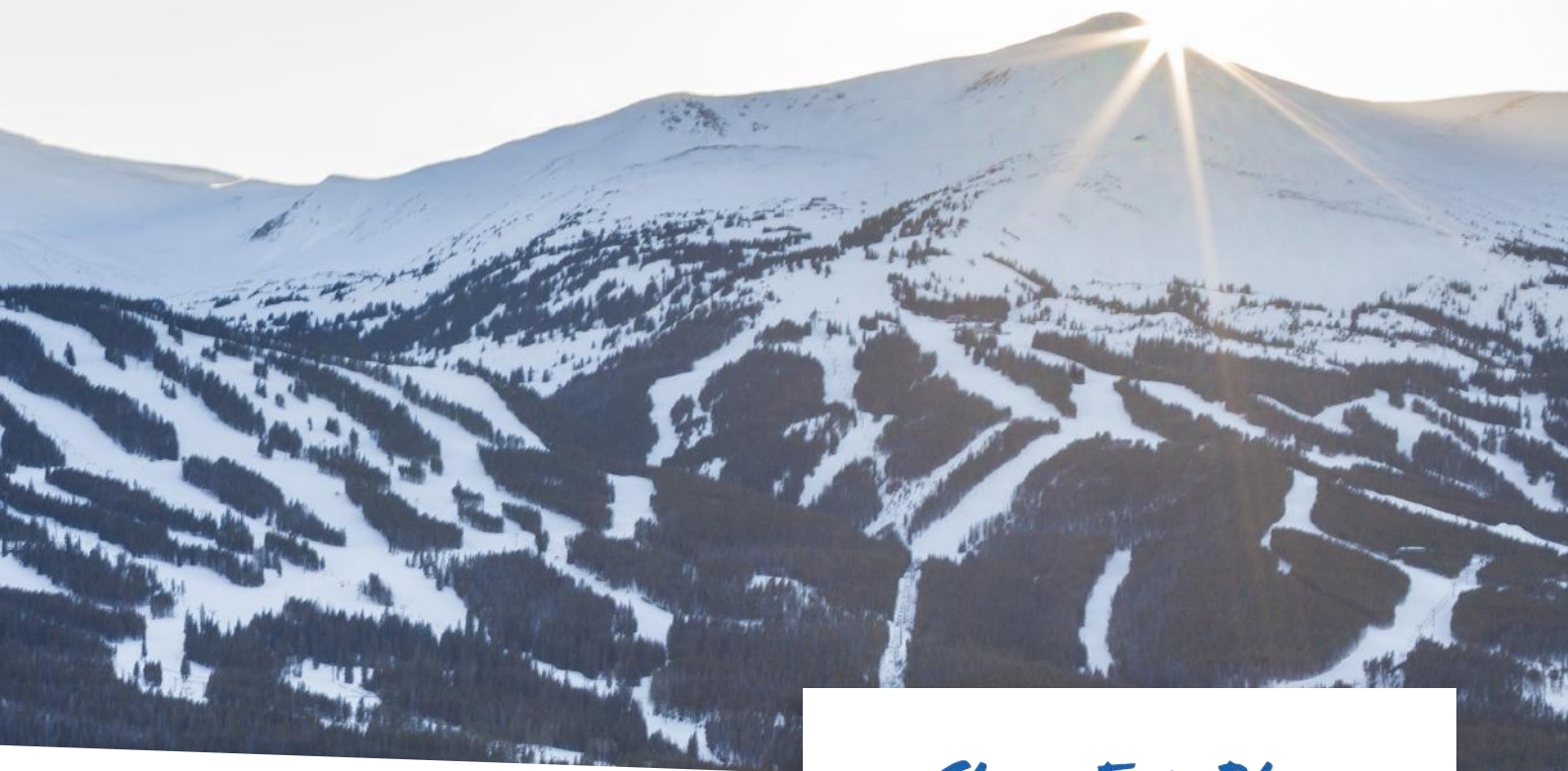
AND

MEMORIES

Building Opportunity from Within

Tourism is, by almost any measure, central to Summit County's economy. For decades, skiing, hiking, biking, and other outdoor recreation have driven job creation and local business success. Locally **collected data** underscores just how dominant tourism has been. According to regional employment figures, approximately 46 to 63 percent of jobs in Summit County are tied to the tourism and hospitality sectors, including accommodations and food services, making it the largest single slice of employment in the area.

That reliance helps explain why the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic were nothing short of an economic earthquake here. As nationwide travel almost entirely stopped in March 2020, tourism jobs evaporated and communities that once buzzed with visitors were eerily quiet. This sharp disruption opened local eyes. "We need to diversify our economy," Ryan explains. "COVID was a big wakeup call for our county and what if something like this happens again?" ►►



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► Ryan's point is not only about a once-in-a-generation pandemic; Summit County's weather has been unusually warm and low on snowfall during recent winters, hinting at longer-term climate trends that could further strain tourism's reliability. That uncertainty is what pushes local leaders to think beyond ski lift ticket sales and vacation rentals.

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The local Chamber itself reflects the community's economic evolution. After shutting down entirely during the Great Recession, a volunteer board resurrected the organization, and it has slowly grown since. Cheri Ryan is the only full-time staff member, supported by a group of contractors. The Chamber does not have a formal economic development arm funded at the county level, largely because that entity was defunded shortly after it was launched. This leaves the Chamber playing many roles: connector, advocate, resource hub, and, increasingly, economic strategist. “The Chamber has stepped into that space to help build connections and fill some of those gaps,” she explains.

This context helps explain why Summit County has leaned so heavily on tourism for so long. Without a formally supported economic development team at the county level, entrepreneurs and local businesses have struggled to find wraparound support in areas like business recruitment or diversification strategy.

To be sure, Summit County's natural beauty draws people from around the globe. But it also attracts remote workers and second-home buyers, whose presence has contributed to rising housing costs and heightened competition for limited housing stock. “For a while during COVID, remote workers came to Summit County,” Ryan reflects. “But a lot of houses and lodging were eaten up. The cost of living went up and it's undeniably very expensive to live here.” And that unforgiving cost structure has real consequences.

Affordable housing scarcity means that many of the workers who keep Summit County's restaurants, hotels, retail shops, and mountain infrastructure running simply can't afford to live here. Local efforts like workforce housing programs and accessory dwelling unit incentives aim to help, but long waits persist.





Board member Blair McGary, Community and Governmental Affairs Area Manager for Xcel Energy, puts it even more pointedly. “The work is here but we can’t get enough laborers up to Summit County to do the work that we need them to do,” she says. Talent shortages aren’t for lack of effort, but because key supports like housing lag the pace of demand.

Ryan and McGary both point to several promising sectors to build economic strength, healthcare being one clear opportunity. It offers stable, higher-paying jobs with career pathways that support long-term residency and it’s a natural fit for any community that welcomes families and needs year-round services.

In addition, the county’s remarkable landscapes make it a natural incubator for companies innovating in outdoor gear, environmental tech, and recreation services. But high commercial lease rates have pushed some startups to relocate to more affordable regions.

Longstanding employers like Climax Molybdenum show that mining can support well-paid, stable jobs in responsible ways. Meanwhile, McGary’s work with Xcel Energy points to growth in energy infrastructure and renewable transitions.

Summit County aims to reach **100 percent renewable energy by 2035**, and local programs like bulk solar purchases and electric bus acquisitions are small but meaningful steps. Ryan notes that counties and towns have embraced reusable bag fees and bans on single-use plastics, signals that environmental stewardship and economic innovation can go hand in hand.

And McGary dives deeper into one key initiative: the **Mountain Energy Project**, a roughly \$50 million program created in partnership with utilities and approved by regulators that encourages electrification across homes and businesses. The goal is to delay additional fossil fuel infrastructure while advancing sustainability. “Rather than bringing an additional pipeline into the community, we’re infusing resources to convert away from natural gas and move toward electrification,” she explains.

This work reflects a broader theme: sustainability isn’t just environmental, but economic. Summit County’s ability to steward its natural assets while building industries that harmonize with those assets could reshape the county’s future.

If diversification is part of the strategy, workforce development is the foundation. Both Ryan and McGary emphasize that the path forward depends on creating strong talent pipelines, mechanisms that connect local people to training, careers, and long-term growth opportunities. Summit County benefits from a community college and strong high school pathways programs including a thriving construction trades initiative where students build tiny homes, but those systems could be strengthened and better aligned with local employer needs.

McGary recalls her own experience: “A lot of young people are getting hired right out of high school, making \$70 to \$80,000 working for electricians and construction companies around the community.” ➤



► Indeed, construction jobs are among the highest paying in the county—and that isn't the case everywhere. Yet even here, developers and employers struggle to fill roles. "I think the construction industry is one of those sectors that's crucial," McGary says. "We need plumbers and electricians, we need these skills and we need to promote them as great career paths."

Summit County has significant potential to strengthen its talent pipeline by expanding access to training and education that helps residents move into higher-paying roles. But building that pipeline goes beyond skills alone; it also requires creating career pathways that are sustainable and realistic for people who want to live and work in the community long-term.



Of course, workforce development cannot be separated from the housing affordability challenges and the seasonality that comes with a tourism-based economy. And, even as programs attempt to expand housing options, many come with restrictions that limit future financial growth. If you buy a deed-restricted home, the resale value is capped.

McGary shares a broader view of housing dynamics, explaining that regulation, from short-term rental caps to accessory dwelling unit policies, may have inadvertently strained the housing market further, reducing options for both residents and workers. "I think we've over-restricted housing," she says. "There are a lot of ways we've regulated ourselves out of meaningful development that moves the needle on affordability."





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Collaborative policies that balance preservation with housing availability may be key, she suggests, and some towns like Silverthorne offer models of success, with incentives such as façade improvement grants and workforce job creation grants.

So, what does success look like for Summit County?

For Ryan, it's finding collaborative, balanced solutions to workforce housing and diversification, solutions that don't rely on temporary fixes or excessive regulation. “We don't want to do away with tourism,” she says, “but we need balance. Workforce housing, better jobs, stable careers—that's success.”

McGary adds that economic success means opportunities that keep local people here, that enable a young electrician, construction worker, small business owner, or startup founder to live and thrive in the community they call home. “It's not about bringing the people here,” she explains. “They will want to come here. But how can we make sure the people who live here feel economic opportunity and growth?” That will come from education, collaboration between local governments and employers, and a shared understanding that economic development is not a scary term but a necessary tool to help shape the next chapter.

“Economic development for decades has been a bad word here,” says McGary. “But once people understand what it really means—real jobs, real opportunities, real homes—that fear starts to turn into excitement.”

Summit County stands at a crossroads that many mountain and resort communities face: how to preserve the natural assets and community identity that make it special while building an economy that works for more than just a season.

From diversifying job sectors beyond tourism, to tackling housing in ways that support local workers, the challenges are complex, but the vision is clear. The message is ultimately one of possibility. “We want Summit County to be a place where families can grow, careers can flourish, and community can thrive,” Ryan says.

McGary's closing thought shines a hopeful light forward: “When people can look around and see opportunity, that's when economic success starts to happen.”

If Summit County can translate that vision into action with creative collaborations and strategic investment, then this mountain economy may not simply survive uncertainty; it might define a new model of resilience for rural, tourism-dependent regions across the West. ■



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