

# McKenzie River Valley Economic Vitality Visioning

Summary of the three focus groups in April and May, 2024



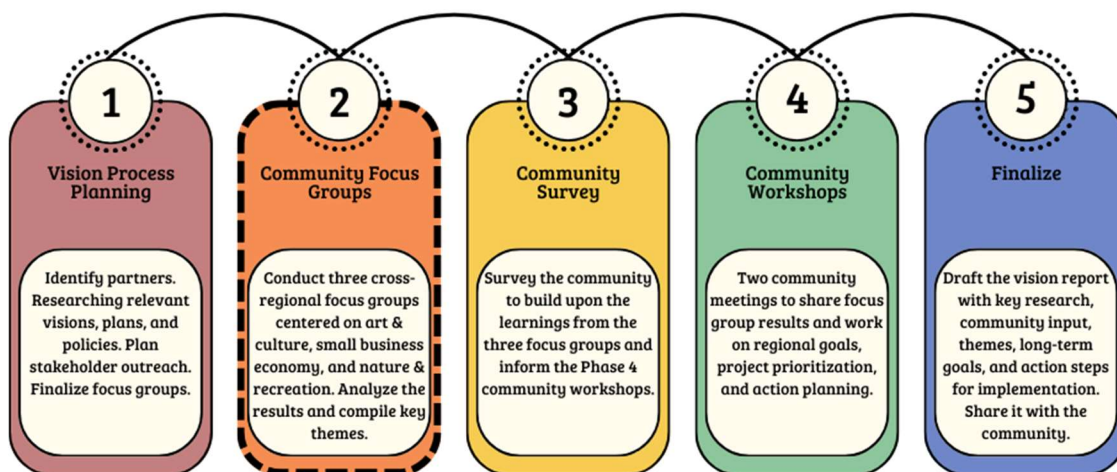
## Project Overview

As a result of the post-wildfire recovery process, the McKenzie River Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) has partnered with Rural Development Initiatives (RDI) to facilitate a regional economic visioning process that would result in a collective regional economic vitality strategy and explore the Main Street approach as a structure to implement the strategy. The overall goal is to build more vibrant economies along the McKenzie River corridor between Cedar Flat to McKenzie Bridge.

As part of this process, RDI and the Chamber facilitated three focus groups in April and May of 2024 to listen to stakeholders and gather input about the kind of economy people would like to see in the region. Each of these focus groups had a different sector focus (arts and culture, 12 participants; small business economy, 15 participants; and nature and recreation, 13 participants). This document provides a brief overview of the discussions and priorities that emerged, as well as anticipated next steps.

## Process

These three focus groups are part of a larger and more comprehensive visioning process that will continue building upon the findings to this point as well as a future community survey and two community workshops. The focus groups occurred as part of Phase 2, shown below. Phases 3 through 5 will occur tentatively in the fall of 2024, after more funding is secured.



## Emerging Themes: Assets & Opportunities

Several recurring themes emerged through the focus groups. Community members identified the following assets and opportunities:

### Art, History, & Heritage

The region is fortunate to have a large arts community with natural beauty that inspires creativity. This includes a local arts guild, arts classes, a garden club, and a diverse community of local artists and musicians. There is a lot of space for art in the communities that can be used to host pop-up art and vendor events, a small business village, and regional music festivals.

The local history is also an asset that can be an opportunity for historic tourism. Heritage opportunities include history tours, education centers, and promotion of historic heritage stories, especially those stories that share community identity, Native American heritage and care for this land, and current land stewardship values and efforts.

### Outdoor Recreation & Events

People were excited by all the outdoor recreation opportunities in the region, notably including trails, bicycling, river activities, camping, golfing, hiking, and running. These have been strong assets and are ripe for growth. The region can partner with industry leaders to enhance local efforts. Other opportunities include increasing the amount of retail space, concert space, and eco-tourism activities.

People also want to see more events and festivals along the Valley. There are shared opportunities with the Arts, History, & Heritage category to use multi-purpose facilities for events, recreation, and community-building programs.

### Environment & Sustainability

Community members value environmental sustainability and desire to protect the river, dark skies, trees, and clean air. Growing an “environmental economy” offers a unique opportunity for these natural assets to be a source of local employment through outdoor industry, tourism, and solitude. Community members also valued transportation sustainability and shared a deep desire for better public transit in the corridor.

### Local Small Business & Entrepreneurship

The McKenzie River Valley is fortunate to have a strong and growing agricultural industry, busy main road with potential customer base, a supportive community for local businesses, and no large business competition. That said, there is a desire for more economic diversity in distinct communities with restaurants, personal services, entrepreneurial startups, pop-up markets, additional retail spaces, lodging, and recreation businesses. McKenzie High School has a youth entrepreneurship class and could be a great partner for some of this work.

### Transportation & Infrastructure

The high-traffic main road serves as a 60-mile “Main Street” that connects individual communities in the McKenzie Valley. Lane County Transit operates the Route 91 bus service that connects the McKenzie Valley to Springfield and Eugene. The service is minimal, with only morning and late-afternoon pickups. Community members want better public transit connections as well as regional bicycling connections between communities.



Opportunities to improve infrastructure include more dependable high-speed internet, fewer power outages, more housing for locals, and a solution for the Leaburg Dam removal.

### Workforce Development

Businesses and organizations shared a desire to have more workers of all ages to support emerging and legacy businesses. Jobs should pay enough that workers can afford to live in the community and attract families to the Valley. Communities consistently mentioned the desire for a more active “shoulder season economy,” indicating that economically vibrant spring and fall seasons could help retain workers long-term.

### Regional Leadership & Collaboration

There has been great desire for regional leadership, especially as seen in the Regional Main Street model. Without an incorporated community as an anchor, nonprofits are often leading the change. A regional bridge-builder and facilitating organization can enhance communication, collaboration, and partnership up and down the Valley.

Developing youth leadership opportunities can generate new momentum and revitalized direction, so organizations should partner with local schools and empower students to share their voices, participate in leadership decisions, and build community.



## Emerging Themes: Challenges

The challenges that people shared are well-known and often discussed. Most challenges fit within the categories below.

### Shortage of Funding & Resources

The top challenge in every focus group was a shortage of financial resources to make desired changes. Despite ever-present financial constraints, the McKenzie River Valley has impressively raised substantial funding for community centers, libraries, the Discovery Center, the McKenzie Track, and more. Even so, access to funding and resources is likely to remain a challenge. Enhancing regional partnerships can help address these issues, but building these leadership structures and partnership strategies can take time.

### Shortage of Regional Leadership

The region is fortunate to have many great community members and organizations providing support. However, collaborative efforts have often faltered and experienced communication breakdowns. Cultural differences between upriver and downriver create additional complications.

### Shortage of New & Emerging Leadership

The shortage of consistent regional leadership is partially a result of difficulty recruiting, developing, and retaining new leaders, especially young leaders. This has led to a few community members carrying a high proportion of the workload. The McKenzie School District has had a declining student population, but there remain talented and interested youth across the region. Building out opportunities for these youth to share their voices and participate in leadership will be essential.

## **Aging Population**

The lack of new and emerging leadership ties-in with the challenge of the region's aging population. Many long-time community members have great passion for the McKenzie River region, but the lack of diverse age groups has resulted in fewer families and students who can continue investing in these local communities. This challenge is connected to all three of the remaining challenges.

## **Geographic Isolation**

Geographic isolation can also be an asset, but in this case, it makes it difficult for the communities to receive needed services that can support families. The long distance to employers and lack of consistent broadband access prevents some workers from choosing to live in the Valley.

## **Limited Commercial Real Estate**

While there are many people who could open a business in the Valley, there are few buildings that are available in which they could start a business. Some property owners of buildings that would be prime opportunities for restaurants or art galleries have not shown interest in renovating and opening their buildings for community businesses and entrepreneurs. Additionally, several communities along the Valley have land that would be great opportunities for future commercial development, but some of this land is open due to destruction from the fire, and rebuilding without financial resources is a huge hurdle.

## **Inadequate Affordable Housing for Locals**

Housing costs and property values have dramatically increased, which has made it more financially difficult, if not impossible, for local residents and workers to stay in the region. Further complications stem from County and State land use restrictions. Rebuilding efforts are ongoing, but even with leadership from organizations like the McKenzie Community Land Trust, increasing the supply and reducing the cost of housing will likely remain a challenge in the future.

## **Lack of Tourism Industry Infrastructure**

There is a desire to bring more visitors for multi-day visits, but the lack of lodging, restaurants, and tourism-based businesses constrains potential economic growth. The region has an abundance of natural tourism amenities, but without these lodging and restaurant assets, it can be difficult to retain tourists for multi-day visits. County and State land use regulations also add to the challenge.

## **Next Step**

The Chamber and RDI will continue working together to secure more funding for the remaining phases of this regional visioning process with the aim of conducting community workshops and developing a regional leadership structure in the fall and winter of 2024/25.

The resulting action plan will inform the priorities of the regional leadership structure and set the foundation for establishing a Main Street organization. This will position the region to pursue additional funding resources and implement programs to energize the long-term regional McKenzie River economy.

## **Contact**

Please contact Ken Engelman, President of the McKenzie Chamber of Commerce, at [president@mckenziechamber.com](mailto:president@mckenziechamber.com) for further information.