

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Contents

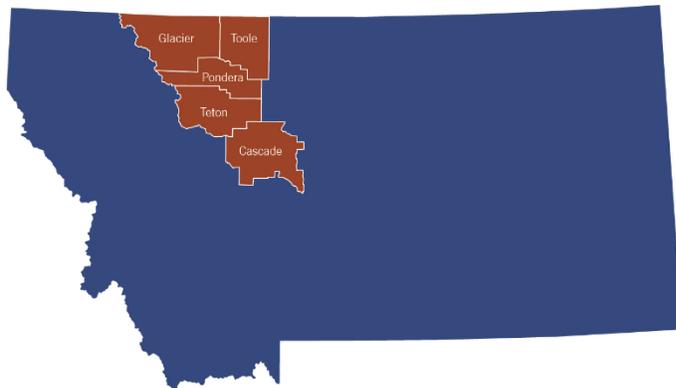
MISSION	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
SUCSESSES	4
ABOUT THE MONTANA NORTHCENTRAL REGION	5
Geography.....	5
Demographics and Socioeconomic Background	5
.....	7
Economy and Workforce	7
Summary of Public and Stakeholder Input	8
STRATEGIC DIRECTION: VISION, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES	9
Workforce/Resident Retention & Community Development	10
Growth in Agriculture and Food Production	12
Transportation and Community Infrastructure.....	15
Tourism and Supporting the Visitor Economy	17
Community Collaborations & Access to Financial Resources	18
REGIONAL ECONOMIC RESILIENCE	20
Steady State Initiatives.....	21
Responsive Initiatives	21
ACTION PLAN WORKBOOK	23
APPENDIX	23

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

MISSION

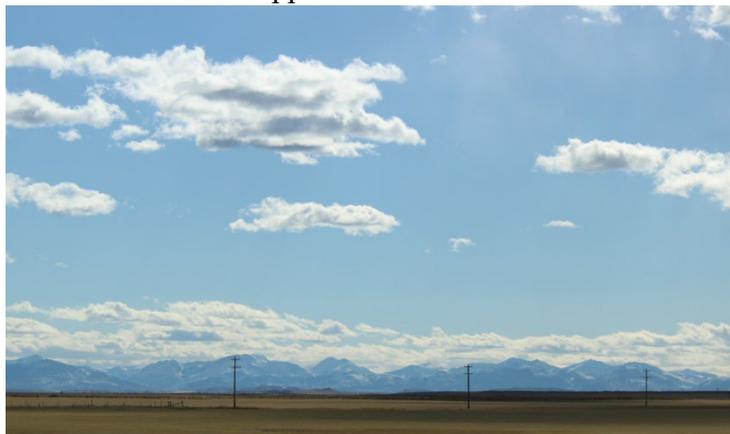
While COVID has continued to result in levels of uncertainty, change and the need for widespread adaptability, Sweetgrass Development's mission remains the same: to assist businesses and community entities with training, projects and support that advances the quality of life and economic well-being of the region.



Sweetgrass Development is a private, non-profit corporation created in 2004 to support economic development within a five (5) county region that includes Glacier, Cascade, Pondera, Teton, and Toole counties, as well as the Blackfoot Nation. Our goal continues to be to support and assist elected officials, leaders, and community stakeholders in the region in achieving their missions through a strong regional voice and

fostering the exchange of information and ideas that create opportunities and solutions.

Sweetgrass Development strives for all residents to find happiness and prosperity. We believe this includes strong infrastructure, viable/affordable and accessible housing, dynamic businesses, and community growth while maintaining local heritage and a culture that makes North Central Montana one of the best places to live in "The Last Best Place".



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Like most economic development agencies, North Central Montana Economic Development District (NCMEDD), doing business as Sweetgrass Development Corporation, utilizes a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) to prioritize regional development strategies that meet identified community needs. These documents are required to be updated every five (5) years to qualify for Economic Development Administration (EDA) assistance, which is critical to the agency's ability to address community needs.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Sweetgrass Development began the process of updating the 2017-2021 CEDS in January of 2022 by publishing a Request for Proposals (RFP) for outside assistance in the process. KLJ was selected for this purpose in April of 2022 and a kick-off meeting to outline a community engagement strategy was held in May.



Public outreach began in August of 2022 and included a community survey, a series of “pop-up” meetings (in which Sweetgrass and KLJ staff “popped-up” at various locations in the region to meet with citizens and to request survey participation), and multiple scheduled meetings with high-level stakeholders and elected

officials. In addition to public input, a thorough review of regional background information and current economic trends was also done. Existing plans for other agencies and communities were reviewed, assisting in problem and goal identification, and ensuring that the CEDS is collaborative and supports additional regional agency efforts.

Like so much of the country, public input, and review of regional strengths and challenges revealed significant concern related to workforce and housing. Community leaders expressed challenges related to recruiting and retention of qualified/skilled workers, exacerbated by a lack of housing stock. Of the housing stock that exists, like the population of many of the communities, is aging.

Although Montana and the north central region did not experience many of the debilitating economic impacts of COVID, certain areas are still recovering from the decrease in seasonal tourism, there continues to be a need for economic diversification. Identification of ways in which communities can be more economically resilient is evident in post-covid recovery. While many communities have adequate public infrastructure, most expressed a desire for expansion of infrastructure that would allow for sustainability and growth. This included water and sewer expansions, additional infrastructure to support non-motorized transportation and tourism (such as walking paths, sidewalks, and wayfinding), and rejuvenation/rehabilitation of downtown and Main Street districts.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

In response to these concerns, the Sweetgrass CEDS has outlined goals and strategies that will focus on economic diversification, building economic resilience, retaining, developing, and recruiting workforce. This goals and objectives outline will address both housing supply and housing condition and supporting infrastructure development. These strategies will assist communities in addressing needs in their downtown/Main Street areas and grow in strategic and meaningful ways.

SUCCESSSES

The COVID-19 pandemic provided both challenges and insights into regional vulnerabilities, coping strategies and ways in which businesses were able to sustain and build resilience. Although there is not currently in-depth data on the full economic impacts of COVID-19, we speculate that although Montana and the north central region was not immune to adverse impacts, because of the remote and rural nature of the area, these were not experienced at the same level as the remainder of the country and most urban areas. In fact, areas within the north central region saw some level of increase in tourism and remote workforce attraction.

Sweetgrass Development was also able to assist over 150 small businesses during the pandemic in accessing federal ARPA funding as well as additional relief dollars. These funds ensured that businesses were able to meet workforce payroll and additional pandemic related needs. In addition, Sweetgrass Development was awarded multiple NADO Impact Awards in both 2021 and 2022. This included a project in partnership with the Blackfeet Tribe and the Blackfeet Community College Health & Sciences Building, the Suta South Brownfields project, the Shelby Bitterroot School Brownfields project, and the 2021 Needs Assessment/Workshop series, which addressed business needs post-pandemic.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

ABOUT THE MONTANA NORTHCENTRAL REGION

Geography



The Sweetgrass region is in the area known as the Rocky Mountain Front, stretching along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains and along the Canadian Border for approximately 110 miles.

Farms in the eastern part of the region give way to ranches on the western edge of the region. Glacier National Park and the Rocky Mountain Front mark the western edge of the region.

Except for the community of Great Falls (the “urban” center of the region with a population of approximately 60,000), the region consists of very low population rural areas in which a large percentage of land is dedicated to ranching, farming and businesses that support these industries. This is the Golden Triangle region which is world renowned for wheat and barley production.

Montana is a sparsely populated state with just over 1 million people statewide, making almost all communities “rural” by federal guidelines. Great Falls is the only “urban” community in the region. Additional communities considered urban in Montana include Billings (population 117,00), 220 miles from Great Falls, Missoula (population 75,000), 170 miles from Great Falls, and Bozeman (population 54,000), 180 miles from Great Falls.

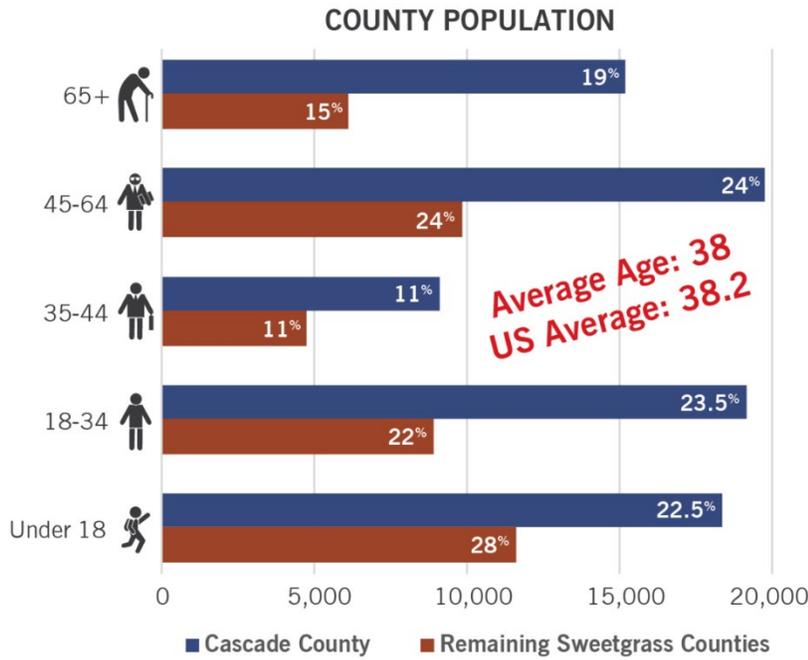
Demographics and Socioeconomic Background

Due to the more urban nature of Great Falls (in Cascade County) as it compares to the remainder of the region, demographics have been separated to ensure demographic and socioeconomic information for the region is not unduly skewed by Cascade County/Great Falls.

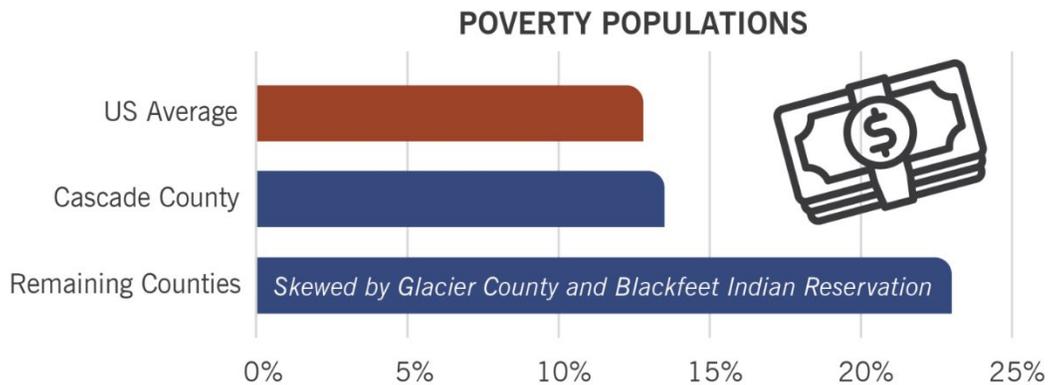
SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Cascade County experienced a 1.3 percent population increase between 2010 and 2020 (81,576 to 80,562). The remaining Sweetgrass counties (Glacier, Pondera, Teton, and Toole Counties) and the Blackfeet Reservation had a statistically insignificant population increase, from an estimated 41,073 in 2010 to 41,220 in 2020.

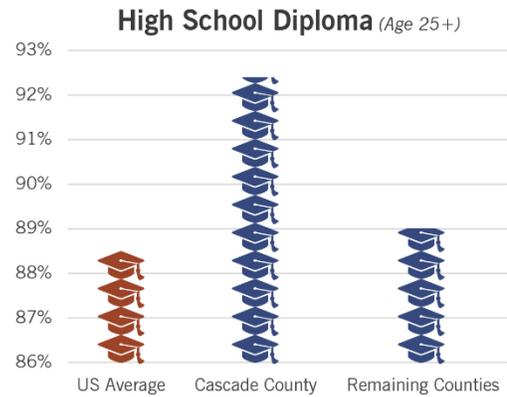
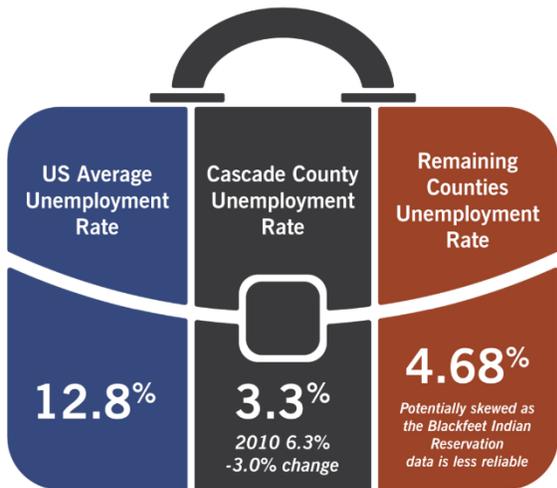
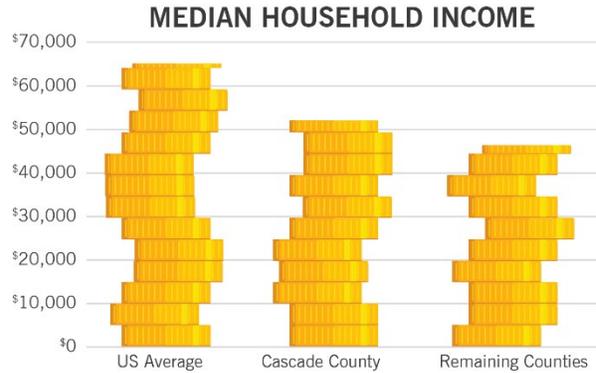
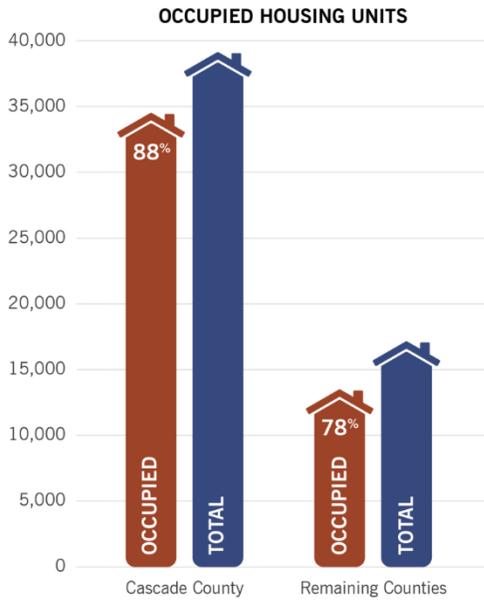


Like much of Montana, the northcentral region is graying. Although there are significant efforts to retain young people and to maintain the multi-generational nature of farming and ranching, young people continue to leave the region (at least initially), often only returning after finishing secondary education and starting families of their own.



SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES



Economy and Workforce

Despite short term impacts related to the Covid pandemic, workforce, and distribution of workforce in the Sweetgrass Region has remained relatively constant. There continues to be strong/predominant employment in the human services (including education, health care and social assistance programs) as well as in service areas that accommodate basic community needs and amenities as well as tourism. Despite the large volume of lands designated to agricultural purpose, the percentage of individuals employed in this field are minimal, at 4 percent in Cascade County and 10 percent in the remainder of the region.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Although every regional economy is wise to consider increased diversification and related economic resilience, the Sweetgrass region exhibits a relatively high level of diversification in its current state.

County	Cascade	Percentage of Total	Glacier	Pondera	Teton	Toole	Blackfeet Indian Reservation	5 County Totals	Percentage of Total
Civillian Employees >16yo	37,118		5,199	2,564	2,729	2,141	3,822	16,455	
Industry									
Ag/Forestry/Fishing/Hunting/Mining	1,352	4%	215	499	524	288	116	1,642	10%
Construction	2,549	7%	314	110	243	64	259	990	6%
Manufacturing	1,496	4%	103	29	81	5	35	253	2%
Wholesale Trade	1,177	3%	77	165	77	13	22	354	2%
Retail Trade	5,226	14%	567	304	273	231	407	1,782	11%
Transport/Warehousing/Utilities	2,055	6%	105	160	128	133	42	568	3%
Information	650	2%	43	23	80	73	17	236	1%
Finance/Insurance/Real Estate	2,201	6%	211	64	130	81	136	622	4%
Prof Mgmt/Admin/Waste Mgmt	2,727	7%	91	111	148	141	35	526	3%
Edu/Health Care/Social Assist	8,979	24%	1,628	680	600	506	1,282	4,696	29%
Arts/Entertainment/Rec/Accomod/Food	3,930	11%	1,012	147	192	351	779	2,481	15%
Other Services	2,021	5%	113	85	106	60	76	440	3%
Public Admin	2,755	7%	720	187	147	195	616	1,865	11%
TOTALS	37,118	100%						16,455	100%

Summary of Public and Stakeholder Input

Public outreach began in August of 2022 and included a community survey, a series of “pop-up” meetings (in which Sweetgrass and KLJ staff “popped-up” at various locations in the region to meet with citizens and to request survey participation), and multiple scheduled meetings with high-level stakeholders and elected officials. A total of 540 surveys were completed and submitted between August 15th and October 3rd. Staff held pop-up meetings at 15 different locations/events and held additional 7 scheduled stakeholder meetings. (A copy of the survey tool as well as a full summary of survey results (by region and by individual county) and stakeholder meeting comments can be found in the Appendix).

At a regional level and in general, people surveyed and who were at meetings felt that the regional economy was relatively stable, with 44 percent of respondents indicating the economy (before COVID) was about the same as it had been and 37 percent of respondents indicating that in the next 5 years, the economy would improve (and an additional 34 percent indicating it would stay the same).



SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Identified strengths and assets were consistent with those identified in prior CEDS and included a strong agricultural economic base, good quality schools, a sense of safety in communities (low crime rates) and continued opportunities for small businesses to develop.

The most frequently identified challenges included retaining and expanding businesses, filling empty storefronts/revitalizing downtown and Main Street areas, and addressing housing issues (to include the need to develop new housing and to renovate/restore older housing units).

When asked how communities/agencies might meet identified challenges and needs, the top three identified means were to partner with surrounding counties for economic development purposes, to provide tax incentives to spur new business, and to expand industrial and commercial growth opportunities. In addition, several respondents indicated they believed additional investment in local infrastructure and investment in community marketing and advertising held promise.

In terms of targeting industries or business for development in the region, survey respondents and meeting attendees indicated they believed the industries with the most growth potential in the region were value added agricultural industries (meat and grain processing, distilling, brewing, etc.) and tourism-based businesses. There was also a strong desire to see growth in main street retail/service businesses despite an understanding that these businesses are often difficult to start and that many that have started in the past have been unable to sustain.

In discussion and in the survey responses regarding obstacles for new businesses to open and sustain in the region, workforce challenges were at the top of the list. Start-up capital, lack of community support (unwillingness in small communities to “stay local”), and insufficient infrastructure were also in the top 5 challenges identified.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION: VISION, GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The 2022-2026 goals and objectives, including those that specifically address economic resilience seek to balance continued growth and development that also reflects the unique culture and historic economy of the north central region. In establishing goals and objectives, regional background information and current economic trends, coordination with existing community plans, public input and community opinion have been strongly embedded. In addition to assuring that Sweetgrass Development can access EDA resources, development of the 2022-2026 CEDS ensures that communities are genuinely invested in the process and the outcomes and that, because of this, they are prepared to invest both capital and human resources in meeting the needs of their communities.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Goals and Objectives are intended to:

- Foster Economic Development and Opportunity
- Increase the size and quality of the workforce (through development of resources that support workforce such as housing, childcare and training)
- Create welcoming communities that support small business and encourage an entrepreneurial environment

Workforce/Resident Retention & Community Development

In almost all the surveys collected during public engagement, and stakeholder meetings, some version of quality of life is noted as a strength and a primary reason why individuals move into and stay in the northcentral Montana region. The small-town feel that permeates the region, even in the urban center of Great Falls, creates a sense of community, safety, and ability to make a real difference that is a draw for residents and for people interested in relocating to the region.

Rural does not, however, mean that people do not still seek quality of life services and amenities which are sometimes difficult to find as well as to fund. Issues such as workforce training, daycare availability, housing, and access to amenities such as restaurants, and other family activities were high on the list of challenges in both the stakeholder meetings and survey responses. The following goals and objectives seek to address resident and workforce recruitment and retention, through support of, and leadership in, expansion of workforce training opportunities, community development and revitalization, and addressing housing availability concerns:

Goal 1: Continued development and financial assistance for job, customer service, and business succession training programs

This requires additional community engagement work and discussion with existing and potential businesses as well as collaboration with area secondary education centers to identify specific workforce needs and then to match those to educational opportunities to achieve the following objectives:

- Improve access to secondary education and trade schools (including broadband development that allows for consistent virtual access)
- Continue to attend trainings, meetings and seminars designed to increase skills and resources related to workforce development
- Developing access to college credits and trade courses for high school students and building improved partnerships with programs to meet needs.
- Identifying/accessing the considerable federal resources currently available to develop workforce and related broadband infrastructure that supports remote access to educational and workforce training resources.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

- Partnering with local companies/businesses to create specific “on the job” training programs that support workforce development for existing businesses seeking to expand and grow.
- Development and facilitation of a “succession planning” training for small and family-owned businesses at risk of closing should the originating owner/operator retire or pass away.
- Continue to provide technical assistance to local business owners as they contemplate starting or growing local businesses

Goal 2: Address Main Street and Downtown issues that do not support business growth or community positivity

Public input and several survey responses and conversations referenced vacant main street/downtown buildings/lots and a desire to make Main Streets vibrant and generally more appealing both for visitors and for perspective new business development. This sometimes includes development of primary infrastructure, but more often is



resolved by increasing community pride and developing the experience of place; how primary thoroughfares looked and felt, especially for visitors and newcomers to the area. The following are typically low-cost objectives by which this can be addressed by building both community pride and community economic development and resilience:

- Repairs/replacement of building facades to ensure a consistent, clean, and safe “Main Street” (This includes repairs/replacements to empty buildings, when possible, to make them appear more utilized. In some communities, this has also included partnerships with artists or other businesses to have art or commerce items in the windows of empty buildings advertising open businesses or highlighting community activities/recreational opportunities)
- Hosting of a community clean-up day in which residents/ business owners take an afternoon to clean up blighted areas/empty buildings
- Utilizing state/federal dollars to repair/construct/improve basic pedestrian infrastructure to encourage “walkability” in the primary business arena (Transportation Alternatives, Safe Roads, and Streets for All, etc.)
- Install new streetlights, building lighting, flower planters, and other aesthetics that encourage community engagement and reduce crime.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

- Plan/host multiple “Main Street” activities that bring current/new residents into the core of the community for relationship building and development of community pride.
- Target infrastructure investments (water, sewer, and roads) that support community growth and the development of new businesses and expansion of existing businesses.
- Continue to support participation in the Montana Main Street Program
- Continue to assist in accessing brownfield planning and construction grant dollars to assist in addressing blighted properties in redevelopment.

Goal 3: Increase available housing with special emphasis on increasing the supply of affordable and workforce housing

- Establish/fortify affordable housing programs with USDA Rural Development, HUD, the Montana Community Reinvestment Initiative, and other state and federal organizations to establish/fund sufficient financial incentives to promote and/or implement affordable housing projects.
- Advocate for and support regulatory and financial incentives for affordable and workforce housing development
- Aid community leadership in implementation of workforce housing zoning in the towns/counties that include subdivision standards for the appropriate location, size, and design standards
- Target infrastructure investments (water, sewer, and roads) that support the development of housing
- Consider how multi-family/multi-unit housing might be developed to meet specific needs (workforce, senior, young families). Multi-family housing, or investments in “vertical builds” and mixed-use housing is often less expensive to develop both in terms of infrastructure and construction.

Growth in Agriculture and Food Production

Agriculture is a primary economic driver in Montana and continues to be key in both maintaining the economic health of the communities in the north central region and providing opportunity for growth. Agriculture is unpredictable and often influenced by factors outside human control such as weather and drought. Goals and objectives related to agriculture are rooted in ways in which agricultural technology, land use, and value-added agricultural tools might be implemented to ensure continued strength and consistency in agricultural pursuits.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES



Goal 1: Protect Agricultural Land

The protection of agricultural land is becoming increasingly difficult, and complex given both environmental and human factors. These include but are not limited to, fewer young family members desiring to take on the family farm, land use issues, deterioration of agricultural land due to weather concerns, and lucrative offers for land for other development purposes.

The following tasks/objectives are identified as ways in which Sweetgrass Development and economic development partners can potentially protect valuable agricultural land moving forward:

- Identification and partnership with Extension and Montana Ag and Food Development Network resources to continue education to farmers and ranchers on control of noxious weeds, the importance of crop rotation, tillage practices, soil erosion, preservation of native vegetation, ditching practices and water conservation and protection of water quality.
- Conduct research and foster partnerships that address and take advantage of changes in commodity markets that could “add value” to the agricultural region, including discussions regarding climate-controlled agriculture (USDA).
- Support the implementation/development of land use policies that prohibit or severely limit annexation of property by municipalities except under certain circumstances, supporting the protection of agricultural land that surrounds existing municipal limits.

Goal 2: Increase opportunities for access for beginning farmers/ranchers and entrepreneurs

National and statewide trends indicate the number of farms and ranches throughout Montana are decreasing while the acreage farmed/ ranched remains relatively stable. One of the results is larger farming operations and fewer people over an exceptionally large geographic area; in addition to reduced operational diversity.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

From an economic perspective, the larger the operation the more capital is needed to be viable and competitive. This creates obstacles and limits opportunities for access to these industries for beginning farmers/ranchers or entrepreneurs.

The following objective has been identified:

- Work with other regional entities and government entities to create incentive programs for beginning farmers/ranchers that provide improved opportunities and financial incentives to landowners/asset owners to rent or sell assets (land, machinery, etc...) to a beginning farmer. (Several states/counties outside Montana have implemented these types of programs. Minnesota is an excellent example)

Goal 3: Support local and regional “food pathways” and creation of a local food systems plan, focusing on creating more local resilience and value-added economic drivers

In Montana, a significant percentage of agricultural products produced are shipped or exported out of state. Based on 2017 USDA Census data the State of Montana produced a market value of 3.5 billion in agricultural products. Of that 3.5 billion, only 9.8 million or 2.8 percent was sold directly to the Montana consumer.



Current scale of the operations and products produced by the current agricultural industry may not line up nicely with a farm to table type approach in this area. Population density to support some of these initiatives may also not be present in such a rural area. Despite previous trends towards larger farming operations and the inherent efficiency of moving product in bulk, recent increases in fuel/diesel, the nationwide shortage of truck drivers, and ongoing concerns about vehicle emissions provide an opening and opportunity for more localized food systems and food pathways.

There is considerable growth in this area, interest in both the state and federal sectors, and significant federal money currently available that would encourage exploration of the following. Sweetgrass partnership/coalition building with agriculture producers, USDA, County Extension and other state and federal partners for further discussion of how agri-business might be expanded and diversified and what opportunities exist. The following objective supports development and support of local and regional food pathways and systems that encourage ongoing agricultural economic development:

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

- Provision of continued support and growth in understanding of the importance of local, regional, and family scale food production that is sustainable. Examples of ways in which this may be accomplished include:
 - Creation/expansion of marketing and advertising campaigns highlighting local/regional growers and farm-to-table opportunities
 - Creation/expansion of events/community gatherings that highlight and support agricultural endeavors and seek to promote regional uniqueness
 - Creation/development of opportunities for non-agriculture-based community members to engage in agricultural endeavors (including promotion of agritourism opportunities)

Transportation and Community Infrastructure

Transportation infrastructure is essential throughout the country, but perhaps no more essential than in rural areas in which access is often limited, impassable or unsafe roadways can lead to a complete halt in commerce and significant safety risks for citizens. Identification of transportation infrastructure needs, including non-motorized infrastructure that supports connectivity and equity in access, areas for growth or enhancement, and comprehensive planning for addressing road and bridge infrastructure is essential to economic sustainability and growth.

Goal 1: Develop a Regional Comprehensive Transportation Safety Action Plan

The first step to addressing transportation infrastructure needs is the creation of a comprehensive plan that identifies critical infrastructure, prioritizes needs, and outlines both the strategies and the funding resources available to address those needs, ensuring the transportation network is maintained, funded, and improved where necessary. Especially over the next five years, there is substantial federal funding available to address transportation infrastructure deficits, including funding available for creation of transportation plans and development of non-motorized transportation infrastructure (sidewalks, biking lanes/paths, and multi-use trails) that promote equity in access and tourism growth.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Given the highly rural nature of most of this region, it may be most cost effective to consider a regional plan (perhaps excluding Cascade County and/or Great Falls as this is an urban center that will have different needs), and focusing on the remaining counties in the Sweetgrass Region



In addition to assisting the region in identifying and prioritizing transportation infrastructure needs and giving community leaders a roadmap for allocation of limited dollars, the Comprehensive Transportation Safety Action Plan is a key step in being able to access state and federal resources for construction of identified projects. This should include attendance at regional transportation meetings engaging Montana Department of Transportation in ongoing discussion and collaboration to improve MDT transportation routes within the region.

Goal 2: Support and encourage prioritizing of resources to support critical water and sewer infrastructure

Although most the communities in the northcentral region have adequate or better-than-adequate water and wastewater infrastructure (especially given the recent influx of American Rescue Plan (ARPA) allocations and grants), community meetings and survey responses indicate a lack of focus or resource allocation for expansion of existing systems to support development of properties and land not currently connected to the city/town systems. Addressing this goal may include the following objectives/tasks:

- Advocating for ongoing investments at the local, state, and federal level for expansion of existing systems to provide for growth opportunities
- Assistance with review/changes in community zoning and annexation policies, allowing for targeted annexation of neighboring county property into city/town limits for the purpose of extension of water/sewer infrastructure that supports business attraction, retention, and growth
- Partnering with community leadership and State Revolving Fund (SRF) staff to ensure that water and sewer infrastructure projects are prioritized and listed on the state Intended Use Plan, maximizing the opportunities to receive Bi-partisan Infrastructure Legislation (BIL) grant and loan forgiveness dollars

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Tourism and Supporting the Visitor Economy

Tourism is one of Montana’s leading industries, creating thousands of jobs, and contributing an estimated \$3.1-\$3.7 billion annually to the Montana economy. In 2021, an estimated 12 million people visited Montana while instate travelers contributed \$.1.1 billion in tourism dollars. Tourism has been identified in several existing economic development and planning documents as a significant economic driver and an opportunity for additional growth and development moving forward.

Even during the pandemic, tourism in Montana remained a viable industry, providing “social distancing” simply by way of the sparse population density. Both Yellowstone and Glacier Parks saw significant increases in visitation and those regions that border these national parks, benefited from the additional exposure. Capturing the current and anticipated future “wave” of tourists and tourism opportunities will assist the region in ensuring a resilient economy. The following goals/objectives will be considered in maintaining and growing the tourism industry:

Goal 1: Develop “specialized” tours and attractions and expand individual community events/tourism campaigns



Tourists are often seeking the unique, the extraordinary and the one-of-a-kind experience. Existing events and programs that provide excitement and destination opportunities can be expanded and new events created that will drive tourism in the region.

- Work with communities and at a regional level to identify and capitalize on events, retail experiences, and outdoor opportunities unique to the region. By way of example, work with the current Valier Ice Fishing Derby to better advertise and/or expand to an “ice fishing trail” in the region or with unique retailers to further highlight and capitalize on their popularity (i.e. Alpine Touch or Windrift Hill).
- Develop a comprehensive list of possible place-based, cultural and ecotourism activities that can be marketed to visitors
- Assist in the development of a “Path to Glacier Park” route that encompasses identified place-based activities.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Agritourism opportunities should also be considered. Agritourism gives producers an opportunity to generate additional income and an avenue for direct marketing to consumers. It enhances the tourism industry by increasing the volume of visitors to an area and the length of their stay.

According to Allied Market Research, the agritourism market size was valued at \$42.4 million in 2019 and is estimated to reach \$63 million by 2027. This both supports the tourism and visitor market and addresses value-added agricultural growth.

Goal 2: Give special consideration (as part of the Transportation Safety Action Plan) of non-motorized travelers, specifically bicyclists

No longer just for the athletic elite, bike tours are becoming a fast-growing trend in the travel industry—and tour operators have taken notice. Travelers are seeking out bike tours to stay active, minimize environmental impact, and experience diverse landscapes and cityscapes at a closer level. With its wide-open spaces, unique landscape features, and small-town appeal, the northcentral region has an opportunity to capture the bicycle-tourism trend. Consideration of how to make rural and community roadways more “complete” with the addition of wider shoulders, enhanced signage, and/or designated bicycle lanes are ways to encourage bicycle tourism and genuine engagement with community businesses.

Goal 3: Develop/expand individual community tourism campaigns, including highlighting special events, times of year, unique community attributes, and regional connectivity to other tourism opportunities (ex: agritourism): As with specialized tours and attractions, highlighting those activities that already happen and/or are being developed is an excellent way to draw tourists and regional/statewide residents into the area. Particularly in the Eastern Plains region, agritourism should be considered. Agritourism gives producers an opportunity to generate additional income and an avenue for direct marketing to consumers. It enhances the tourism industry by increasing the volume of visitors to an area and the length of their stay. According to Allied Market Research, the agritourism market size was valued at \$42.4 million in 2019 and is estimated to reach \$63 million by 2027.

Community Collaborations & Access to Financial Resources

We can achieve more together than on our own has always been true, but no more so then when working in rural areas with limited human and financial capital. In response to the survey question “How would you meet the economic development and business needs in your community,” the response that received the most responses were “Partner with surrounding counties for economic development purposes.”

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

To ensure maximum return on investment, acknowledge that individual communities and counties cannot achieve their goals in a bubble, and recognition that the state legislature has a role to serve in collaboration and community development, the following goals and objectives address the need to collaborate as fully as possible:

Goal 1: Continue to facilitate communications between community leadership, county leadership, state, and federal legislators, and community non-profit organizations.

- Support local leadership programs that increase the skills of community citizens to participate in their communities and to step into leadership positions as those become available.
- Work with city, county, and state level elected leadership to continue authorization and appropriations that assist in the funding of economic development activities
- Maintain communication with NADO to support and follow programs, funding, and legislation at the national level



Goal 2: Assist local/county governments in formally identifying needs (planning) and then identifying potential financial resources (loans/grants) that support completion of projects that meet those needs

- Attend local needs assessment meetings and then, as appropriate, provide letters of support, grant writing, and technical assistance as requested.
- Continue to market the Revolving Loan Fund for new and existing small business ventures and expansions

Goal 3: Continue to work in partnership with the Blackfeet Nation to support the Tribe's Economic Resilience and Recovery Plan

In 2022, the Blackfeet Nation published their Economic Resilience and Recovery Plan (May 2022). This document, in addition to the Blackfeet Nation's CEDS clearly outlines the specific needs as identified by the Tribe and via Reservation resident input. The 2022 Resilience and Recovery Plan specifically outlines updates to CEDS goals that will provide the best opportunity for the Tribe to address COVID challenges and continue to grow the Tribal economy.



Sweetgrass Development is committed to working with the Tribe as appropriate and requested to ensure opportunities are made available for the Tribe to meet their identified needs and goals including an intentional effort to provide the Tribe with information, technical assistance, and access to financial resources that will support their identified goals of:

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

- Ongoing workforce development (including young workforce)
- Engagement and development with Native Community Development Financial Institutions
- Development and marketing of cultural and natural resources
- Development of renewable (wind) energy resources
- Access to critical transportation infrastructure resources (including rail)
- Maintenance and updating of the Tribal Emergency Operations Plans
- Maintenance of Tribal health services that support preventative and responsive health resources

REGIONAL ECONOMIC RESILIENCE

It is becoming increasingly apparent that regional economic prosperity is linked to the ability to prevent, withstand, and quickly recover from major disruptions to the economic base. Many definitions of economic resilience limit focus to the ability to quickly recover from disruption.

In the context of economic development, economic resilience becomes inclusive of three primary attributes: 1) the ability to recover quickly from the disruption or shock, 2) the ability to withstand the disruption or shock, and 3) the ability to avoid the disruption or shock altogether. Establishing economic resilience in a local or regional economy requires the ability to anticipate risk, evaluate how the risk can impact key economic assets, and build a responsive capacity (EDA, Economic Resilience, 2020).

Every year, people and communities experience disasters and other major disruptions that impact the economy (in both positive and negative ways). These can be the result of damaging weather events, the decline of a significant industry or closure of a major employer. The financial, social, and environmental costs of these disruptions continue to rise and represent substantial drains on governments, businesses, communities, and the nation.

Sweetgrass Development intends to integrate resilience in two ways:

- Planning for and implementing resilience through specific goals and actions that increase the long-term economic durability of the region (steady state), and
- Establishing and/or enhancing information networks among regional stakeholders that encourage active and regular communications between the public, private, educational, and non-profit sectors, promoting collaboration that allows for faster and more effective response to potential future challenges (responsive).

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

Steady State Initiatives

1. Community stakeholders/community leaders will be aware of county-level and regional county planning efforts and will have the opportunity to participate in resiliency and hazard mitigation planning processes.
2. Sweetgrass Development will work to enhance their web-based toolkit to focus on resources and step-by-step guides for community-based projects, educational opportunities, local capacity building opportunities, and other forms of development of community capital and coordination of resources.
3. In addressing Workforce and Resident Retention, Goal 1: Continued development and financial assistance for job, customer service, and business succession training programs, Sweetgrass Development will consider programs that encourage a resilient workforce that can better shift between jobs/industries.
4. More and more workers are moving to a remote work environment. Given the importance of a strong and reliable telecommunications network in recruiting these workers, ensuring redundancy in telecommunications and broadband networks to protect commerce and public safety will be a resilience priority. Sweetgrass will work regionally and at the state and federal levels to advocate for, and support, telecommunications and broadband development that support both remote work opportunities and a resilient workforce.

Responsive Initiatives

The Sweetgrass Development CEDS serves as a roadmap to empower the region and the counties within that region, to develop and implement a plan of action, and utilize resources efficiently, embedding resilience and economic diversity into identified goals and objectives. There is no silver bullet in this arena. Resilience and diversification are a series of long-haul strategies to secure success through multiple community initiatives coming together to provide support and balance to one another.

Moving forward, continued community engagement at the local, regional, state, and national levels will be critical. This area is founded and continues to sustain due to a legacy of families that have created homes in a sometimes-brutal natural environment and with few traditionally urban resources. There is a need to balance steady growth and development that also reflects the unique culture and historic economy of the region.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

1. Sweetgrass Development will continue to plan and implement goals and objectives that embed resilience in workforce, communications, and collaborative goals that seek to bolster the long-term economic durability of the region
2. Agriculture continues to be a key economic driver in this region. Resilience planning considers ways in which agricultural technology, land use, and value-added agricultural tools might be implemented to ensure continued strength and consistency in agricultural pursuits. Also related to agriculture, and to access, natural disasters such as drought, flooding, hazardous materials spills, severe winter storms, strong wind events and wildfires have and can heavily impact these small communities. Resilience planning will consider better ways in which to keep communities and related Emergency Services connected and in communication to minimize negative impacts in this arena.
3. Infrastructure, especially transportation infrastructure has been identified as an essential piece of community and business recruitment and growth. In addition to addressing the health of businesses and the quality of life in community, strong community infrastructure should be addressed for both access and emergency response resiliency.
4. As part of the discussion related to disaster preparedness and resilience, climate resilience that addresses hotter temperatures, dryer conditions, and extreme weather patterns is important to address. This is particularly relevant when discussing infrastructure resilience and should be considered in community conversations and planning.

SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

SERVING THE BLACKFEET NATION, THE LITTLE SHELL TRIBE, AND CASCADE, GLACIER, PONDERA, TETON & TOOLE COUNTIES

ACTION PLAN WORKBOOK

The Action Plan Workbook and Appendix Documents can be found as a separate attachment

APPENDIX

I. Public Survey Template

II. Public Survey Summary

Regional Summary

Teton County

Pondera County

Toole County

Glacier County

Cascade County

III. Stakeholder Meeting Summaries