

**RICHLAND COUNTY**

**May 2025**

# Economic Diversification/ Resilience Strategy



**RICHLAND COUNTY**  
**ECONOMIC**  
**STRATEGY**

**GROWTH. OUR WAY.**

richland  
**redc.**  
economic development corp

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# INTRODUCTION



The Richland Economic Development Corporation (REDC) is a non-profit organization established in 1987. The REDC mission is to act or to encourage action by others that assist potential new and existing businesses to improve their chance of survival and contribution to the economic growth in Richland County, Montana. REDC is focused on long-term expansion, fortification, and diversification of the Richland County economy.

In September of 2024, REDC published a Request for Proposals (RFP) for outside assistance in the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) process and concurrent work on an Economic Diversification Strategy (EDS). REDC selected KLJ in October of 2024, and hosted a kick-off meeting outlining the process, including a community engagement strategy in November of 2024.



Take a quick survey  
and shape the future  
of our local economy.



**WHAT'S YOUR  
VISION**  
FOR RICHLAND COUNTY?

Learn more and complete the survey online.

[richlandeconomicdevelopment.com](http://richlandeconomicdevelopment.com)

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Public outreach began in December of 2024. This included a community survey, a series of “pop-up” meetings where REDC and KLJ staff “popped up” at locations in the county to meet with citizens and to request survey participation, and scheduled meetings inviting high-level stakeholders and elected officials.

KLJ also conducted a thorough review of county, regional, state, and national background information and current economic trends. KLJ also reviewed existing plans from other agencies, the County, and individual communities. These evaluations ensured that the CEDS and EDS were collaborative, built on existing efforts, and supported new community, County, and regional efforts.

Although COVID did not economically impact northeastern Montana as compared to many urban areas, there were impacts. The Sidney Sugars plant closed in April of 2023. Sidney Sugars was a significant employer for Richland County. The plant's closure resulted in the loss of nearly 100 jobs and a tax base that had supported the local economy for nearly 100 years.

The closure is indicative of the types of incidents that support the continued need for economic diversification strategies. While it is extremely uncommon to successfully replace a single employer or industry, it remains important to identify ways in which communities, especially rural communities, can be economically resilient and respond readily to these disruptions.

# WHAT IS ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION

**Economic diversification is the process of shifting an economy away from a single revenue source toward multiple sources from a range of sectors and markets.**

## **Economic Diversification Strategy Components**

Community Participation  
Data Gathering  
Analysis of Local Economy  
Inventory of Local Economic Development Tools  
Development Areas  
Cluster Identification  
Recruitment Capability  
Goals and Objectives  
Prioritization of Goals  
Implementation Plan  
Performance/Evaluation  
Final Report

It is increasingly apparent that economic prosperity is linked to the prevention, withstanding, and quick recovery from major disruptions to the economic base. Many definitions of economic resilience and diversity focus on the aptitude for quick recovery from disruption. In relation to economic development, economic resilience becomes inclusive of three primary attributes: 1) aptitude for quick recovery from the disruption or shock, 2) the ability to withstand the disruption or shock, and 3) the capacity 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).

Economic diversification is one way in which communities can begin to address long-term economic resilience. Economic diversification is the process of shifting an economy away from a single revenue source toward multiple sources from a range of sectors and markets. This shift becomes important in communities where clear primary economic drivers are often unstable, such as the oil and gas industry or agriculture. In these communities, the economy is driven by “boom and bust” cycles. While the “booms” bring significant growth and revenues, the “bust” cycles can leave communities devastated.

The goal of economic diversification is not to replace these keystone industries, but to consider ways in which to supplement and diversify from those primary revenue streams. This variety reduces the dependence on a sole source of revenue, and allows communities more stability of their economy, workforce, and residency. This balance, in turn, boosts economic growth, reduces short term economic volatility, and creates an environment more conducive to external investments.



# PROCESS AND APPROACH

## Community Participation and SWOT Analysis

Public outreach was critical to the development of the CEDS, and the EDS. Formal public engagement began in December of 2024 and included a community survey. Surveys were available in hard-copy and on-line between December 10, 2024 and January 10, 2025.

REDC and KLJ staff also “popped up” at various location in the county to meet with citizens and request survey participation. REDC and KLJ staff held pop-up meetings at 5 locations throughout the County (Sidney, Lambert, Fairview, and Savage) and 1 additional scheduled stakeholder meeting (in Sidney). They also scheduled meetings for high-level stakeholders and elected officials.

**279**

Surveys were completed

Citizens completed and submitted 279 surveys, representing a diverse group of stakeholders. A copy of the survey tool, a full summary of survey results, and stakeholder meeting comments are found in the Appendix.

### Identified strengths and assets included:

A powerful sense of community and high quality of life  
Sense of safety with low crime rates  
Strong agricultural base  
Good schools  
Reasonable access to healthcare  
Continued opportunities for small businesses to develop

### The most frequently identified challenges included:

Business retention and expansion  
New local businesses  
Revitalizing downtown and Main Street areas (in Sidney and Fairview)  
Providing more entertainment options  
Providing better/more housing options

Survey respondents indicated a need for more strategic planning, better identification of local resources and networking opportunities, leadership and workforce training, and marketing and social media assistance. One question asked about obstacles to opening new businesses in Richland County. Respondents overwhelmingly noted workforce challenges due to the lack of population, their rural location, and lack of community support for local business. Start-up capital, regulations, where to seek support, lack of commercial real estate and insufficient local infrastructure to support business growth were issues also mentioned.

Survey respondents and meeting attendees indicated they believed the industries with the most growth potential in the County were retail, agricultural industries, and recreation-based businesses. The respondents also included energy development, healthcare services such as dental, physical therapy, and mental health, and manufacturing as important development areas.

## **County Performance and Drivers**

The U.S. Economic Development Administration's Innovation Intelligence (2021 release) provided data and information for the local economy. This resource is designed to help communities assess their capacity for innovation, diversity, and economic growth. It provides a comprehensive analysis of a region's economic potential using five key indices:

- Human Capital and Knowledge Creation
- Business Dynamics
- Business Profile
- Employment and Productivity
- Economic Well Being

Each index generates rankings and percentile scores for 3,110 counties across the U.S. The U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis, U.S. Census, and the Richland County Economic Diversification and CEDS survey results contributed additional supporting data.

## Demographics and Socioeconomic Background

The boom-and-bust cycle is characteristic of Richland County's demographics which are heavily impacted by an energy-based economy. The county grew rapidly between 2010-2020, going from a population of 9,746 in 2010 to 11,491 in 2020, a gain of almost 18% over the span of a decade. But by 2023, the population had stagnated and declined to 11,329. This trend is pervasive across the County and at the City of Sidney, where a slight majority of the county population resides.

The median age in Richland County is 38 years. This midpoint is slightly younger than the median ages of both Montana (40.2) and the United States as a whole (38.7). Over a quarter of the county's population is under the age of 18. At the same time, over 17% of the county's population is over the age of 65. The county has a slight male majority, with 101.1 males for every 100 females. However, this does not hold true across all parts of the county. In the City of Sidney, there is a considerable female majority, with only 90.7 males for every 100 females. This implies that the population in the county's unincorporated areas and smaller towns is heavily male.

**\$69,578**

Median household  
income in Richland  
County

The median household income in Richland County is \$69,578. This number is equivalent to the statewide average and lower than the national average of \$78,538. Nevertheless, Richland County's poverty rate of 7.1% is significantly lower than that of the state of Montana or the United States, both of which sit at around 12%. Only 3.8% of children in the county live below the poverty line. However, the poverty rate for seniors is higher, at about 17.2%. Approximately 4% of households in the county receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (i.e., food stamps), including 7.6% of households with children under the age of 18.

The Richland County  
poverty rate is

**7.1%,**

lower than the state of  
Montana (~12%).

Households with a Hispanic or Latino householder are more than three times more likely than other households to receive SNAP benefits, which may reflect seasonal/migrant workers are more likely than full-time residents to require outside benefits.

October 2024  
Unemployment Rate:

**2.3%**

Unemployment in Richland County can vary due to the cyclical nature of the oil and gas industry. The unemployment rate in October 2024 was 2.3%, which is among the lowest levels seen in the thirty-five years since unemployment data has been collected. Unemployment has hovered around 3%. However, these numbers sit in contrast to a COVID-era spike in 2020-2021, when up to 10% of the county's workforce was unemployed. Over 96% of Richland County residents over the age of 25 hold at least a high school diploma, and 19.4% have a bachelor's degree.

**Unemployment in  
Richland County can  
vary** due to the cyclical  
nature of the oil and  
gas industry.

## Economy and Workforce



In 2020, there were

**5,625**

civilian workers in  
Richland County

Agriculture,  
Fishing,  
Hunting,  
and Mining employed

**975**

people, or

**17.3%**



Employment in Richland County is dispersed across industries. In 2020, there were 5,625 civilian workers, aged 16 and older, in Richland County. The United States Census Bureau classifies these workers into 13 categories of industry. The largest of these categories in the county were Agriculture, Fishing, Hunting, and Mining, which employed 975 people, or 17.3% of the total workforce. The second largest industry cluster was Education, Healthcare, and Social Assistance, at 943 workers, followed by Retail at 575. Together, these three industrial categories made up over 44% of all employment within Richland County.

Employment in these industries is not evenly dispersed throughout the County. For example, the category of Education, Healthcare, and Social Assistance was the largest employer in both Sidney (13.6%) and in Fairview, (30.5%). Unsurprisingly, Agriculture, Fishing, Hunting, and Mining made up 29.3% of employment in the County's unincorporated areas.

Between 2010 and 2020, the size of the workforce in Richland County grew by 8.8%, about half the rate of the county's population growth. This growth occurred unevenly between industries. Employment in Wholesale Trade, for example, dropped by more than 50%, from 157 jobs to just 72. However, this reduction in employment in one sector was outweighed by growth in Construction (+55.7%); Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (+64.3%); and Information (+73.2%). While each of these categories account for less than 10% of the County's employment, their expansion signals ongoing changes and diversification to Richland County's economy.

In terms of raw numbers, Construction added 200 workers, the most of any industry, while Agriculture, Fishing, Hunting, and Mining lost 101 workers.

This data only applies to Richland County residents, and disregards non-County residents who work in Richland County. These metrics also disregard the total economic impact of each industrial category in terms of GDP. These numbers do not include the transient workers typical of the oil and gas industry, who work in the county but whose full-time residence is elsewhere.

Richland County's economy often follows the price of oil. Global troughs in the price of oil in 2016 and 2020 correlated to increases in unemployment in the county. Prices are currently relatively high, between \$70 and \$80 per barrel as of March 2025, and are expected to remain so until at least 2026. REDC's interest in diversifying the county economy is proactive and will assist in further mitigating the volatility of its most prominent and lucrative industry.



### **Richland County's economy often follows the price of oil**

Global downturns in the price of oil in 2016 and 2020 correlated to increases in unemployment in the county.

One important aspect of Richland County's workforce is how it gets to work. Most workers (85.7%) commute via car, with 77.9% driving alone and only 7.8% carpooling; about 9% walk to work; and 5% work from home. Those who walk represent more than double the state of Montana's rate of walking (4%) but less than half the rate of those working from home (11.6%). 95% of households have access to a vehicle, of which over two-thirds have at least two vehicles, and one-third have at least three.

Commuting times vary significantly. The mean commute time for workers is just over 20 minutes. There is a noteworthy difference between the sexes. Women have a mean commute time of just 12.5 minutes, and over half commute less than 10 minutes. Men have more than double the mean commute time (26.9 minutes) and nearly 10% of men commute more than an hour. A little over 10% of workers in the county commute across state lines, mostly to North Dakota, while 2% commute to other Montana counties. Most workers who live in the County also work in the County.



### **Most workers who live in the County also work in the County.**

A little over

# **10%**

of workers in the county commute across state lines, mostly to North Dakota.



Housing is another key factor for growing and maintaining the county's workforce. Over 66% of housing units are single-family detached housing, 16.1% are mobile homes. The remaining 20% of housing is apartments or attached single-family homes (i.e., townhomes). Almost 70% of housing units are owner-occupied, typically larger households on average (2.67 people) than renter-occupied housing (2.13 people). The county contains newer housing stock due to the explosive population growth between 2010-2020, with over 20% constructed in that decade.

Richland County's rental market is affordable. The median monthly rent in the County is \$866 and \$890 in Sidney. Nationwide, almost half of renting households are considered rent burdened. This means they spend more than 30% of their income on rent. In Richland County, however, only slightly more than 30% of renting households are rent-burdened. The rental vacancy rate of 11.2% is a factor in keeping prices low.



The housing market in Richland County is slightly less affordable for owners. Only 3.1% of owner-occupied units are vacant. This low vacancy creates a tighter for-sale housing market than the rental unit market. The county's median home value is \$259,000, and slightly lower in Sidney at \$249,100. Median monthly owner costs for mortgaged units are more than twice as high as rents, at \$1,867 per month.

However, because homeowners in Richland County have higher incomes, on average, than renting households, they exhibit a similar rate of housing cost burden. About 28% of households in owner-occupied housing spend more than 30% of their income on their mortgage and associated costs.



## Human Capital and Knowledge Creation

From 2010 to 2023, Richland County's population of residents, aged 25 to 44, experienced moderate growth, increasing by 736 people (+25.3%). While population growth is important, human capital is also measured by the capacity of the workforce, which includes college students, skilled trades, and established professionals.

Richland County has room for improvement in the **knowledge-based industries and research capacity**.

Richland County has an educated population, with strong ranking in some college attainment (ranked 392) and associate degree attainment (ranked 413) nationwide. However, its ranking in the Human Capital and Knowledge Creation Index is 2,655 out of 3,110 counties. This low ranking reveals room for improvement in the knowledge-based industries and research capacity.

Currently, the county possesses limited high-tech industry employees, impacting its overall innovation ranking. Existing infrastructure, educational institutions, and workforce training programs could be leveraged to build high-tech innovation capability and promote research and development activities within the region.

## Business Dynamics Index

Richland County scores **low to moderate** in business competitiveness

Richland County ranks 2,539 out of 3,110 in the Businesses Dynamics Index. This score reflects low to moderate business competitiveness. The County carries a strong presence of small businesses, ranking 388<sup>th</sup> in small establishments per 10,000 workers. Its ranking for high-tech early-stage business foundation, however, is significantly lower (ranked 1,770). This ranking suggests that while businesses actively exist, they are not heavily focused on technology-driven industries.

Median household income of **\$69,578**

Is comparable to Montana's median income.

Despite a median household income of \$69,578, comparable to Montana's median income of \$69,922, new business formation is limited within the County. Historically, the local economy has historically been driven by agriculture, energy, and extraction industries, and remains so to this day, which. This economy, while providing stability, also limits diversification and entrepreneurial growth.

## Business Profile Index

The county struggles in the Business Profile Index, ranking 2,600 out of 3,100 counties. Richland County ranks 1,865 out of 3,100 counties in industry diversification with a strong as a strong presence of large establishments (ranked 494). Access to resources for entrepreneurship remains moderate, which could hinder efforts to develop new business ventures.

A key challenge for business expansion is broadband infrastructure. While Richland County has a high economic well-being ranking (144 out of 3,110), broadband adoption barriers (ranked 138) remain a concern. Expanding high-speed internet access could enhance business development, attract remote workers, and improve access to online markets.

## Employment and Productivity Index

Richland County ranks 2,981 out of 3,110 in the Employment and Productivity Index. This very low ranking indicates a lower level of positive outcomes from existing economic activities. Industry performance suggests current limited diversification beyond the county's traditional services. Contrarily, the county ranks well in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per worker (ranked 256), reflecting strong productivity within its key industries. From 2020 to 2023, Richland County experienced significant GDP fluctuations, with a notable 27% increase in 2023, ranking first in Montana for 2023 GDP growth. Despite this growth, the county's ranking for high-tech industry employment change (ranked 1,951) infers a lack of momentum in shifting toward a technology driven economy. Moreover, such extreme growth could be a signal that the industries driving the County's economic performance – namely, oil and gas – are volatile. This unpredictability highlights the need for a more diverse economy.

## Quality of Life and Community Assets

Public surveys distributed across Richland County indicated residents value their strong sense of community, safety, and essential services. Key assets identified include:

- **Agriculture** as a foundational industry and cultural cornerstone
- **A strong educational system**, provides a skilled workforce
- **Access to healthcare**, ensures residents' well being

Despite these strengths, infrastructure limitations hinder business development and overall quality of life. Addressing these gaps could help Richland County attract new residents, businesses, and investment.

# ANALYSIS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The strategic planning process used in development of this economic diversification strategy facilitates community collaboration to prepare for economic shifts, asset management, and regional vitality. KLJ and REDC incorporated a Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis into the public survey and was part of the stakeholder meetings. The SWOT analysis helps groups verbalize the internal (strengths and weaknesses) and external (opportunities and threats) factors impacting the functionality and success of the community. It is a common business analysis and decision-making tool that helps build strengths, minimize weaknesses, seize opportunities, and counteract threats.



The SWOT analysis for this project revealed that Richland County	In addition, the community contains
<p>Holds a <b>strong sense of community</b></p> <p>Creates a <b>safe place</b> to live</p> <p><b>Agriculture</b> is a fundamental part of the community's identity and heritage.</p>	<p>A good <b>educational system</b></p> <p>Access to <b>basic healthcare</b></p> <p>Opportunities for <b>small businesses</b></p> <p>Available <b>employment opportunities</b></p>

Residents of the county are most concerned about the limited entertainment options for all ages, especially children.

In contrast, residents of the county are most concerned about the limited entertainment options for all ages, especially children. They are also concerned with the retention and expansion of both new and existing businesses. The need to revitalize downtown areas remains a key priority. The County's remote location and small population creates a significant threat to attract and retain a skilled workforce. Business recruitment and development are further constrained by a lack of community support, limited access to startup capital, government regulations, and a shortage of available commercial real estate. A copy of the public engagement survey, summary of results, and SWOT analysis can be found in the Appendices.

# INVENTORY OF LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

While the discussion and outline of diversified approaches is important to improve the economy, these strategies should honor traditional northeastern Montana economic and cultural drivers with a determination of how existing economic development tools might continue to be the most effective. A review of past economic development measures, community planning documents, and community input provided an understanding of the County's historic, cultural, economic, and infrastructure development to date. The understanding of these components is critical when looking forward to economic strategies that may be effective in the future. The following resources and documents were considered as part of the review.

## **Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS):**

REDC is leading the development of a five-year, EDA-approved, countywide plan and concurrently creating the Economic Diversification Strategy (this document). Both are leveraging countywide partnerships and statewide resources to strengthen the economy within Richland County.

## **Richland County, Town of Fairview, and the City of Sidney Growth Policies**

All three of these documents were completed in 2015 (2015-2020). The Richland County growth policy is currently being updated by Interstate Engineering. The existing documents reiterate an understanding that the County's current economy is based on agriculture, energy production, and outdoor recreation. Overarching goals echo those outlined in the CEDS and in the EDS in their seeking to promote population growth and sustain new business, while ensuring community infrastructure growth.

## **State of Montana**

The State has many resources available to REDC, primarily through the Department of Commerce and the Governor's Office of Economic Development. These resources include technical assistance, grant, and loan resources that can be utilized to support economic development, diversification, and provide support for existing businesses.

## **Montana Economic Developers' Association (MEDA)**

REDC is a member of MEDA, a state level agency that strengthens Montana's communities and economic development through education, advocacy, and collaboration. MEDA comprises over 150 economic development practitioners, all of whom are working to advance development through business creation, expansion, retention, and diversification of the state's economic base.



# IDENTIFICATION OF DIVERSIFICATION GOALS

The REDC Economic Diversification Strategy (EDS) is designed to complement the CEDS. Its primary goal is to provide short and long-term targets that will assist the County, and the communities within the County to consider ways in which the economy can become more resilient through diversification.



Richland County's current economy is based on agriculture, energy production, and outdoor recreation. These drivers will continue to be the case for years to come. In no way is the diversification strategy meant to replace these powerful economic drivers or to minimize the importance of continuing to foster those industries. Instead, the goals outlined in the EDS are meant to supplement and diversify from those primary revenue streams. This reduces the dependence on a sole source of income, affording communities more consistency and stability to their economy, workforce, and residency. This, in turn, boosts economic growth, reduces short term economic volatility, and creates an environment more conducive to external investments. Economic diversification takes a "this AND that" approach, rather than a "this OR that" approach.

In considering economic diversification and development of the related goals and objectives, REDC considered the following:

- 1. Oil and gas boom-and-bust cycles:** Despite the inconsistency of this industry and the possible need to rely less on it as the key economic driver, data suggests that there remain opportunities for additional industry expansion and exploration.
- 2. Coal, wind, solar and hydro power is a growing opportunity:** Renewable energy resource development directly conflicts with traditional oil, gas, and coal development. For diversification purposes, however, economic development professionals and their community partners should be "energy agnostic," taking an all-of-the-above approach.
- 3. Affordable housing** availability has a direct correlation to recruitment and retention of the workforce: This connection is explored more thoroughly as part of the CEDS but should be addressed as part of increasing overall economic resilience as a key part of the ability for communities to attract new members and new industries.
- 4. Agriculture is a key economic driver:** Like oil and gas, this industry is unpredictable and is often heavily influenced by weather, and other factors outside human control. Diversification should consider ways in which agricultural technology, land use, and value-added agricultural tools might be implemented to ensure continued strength and consistency in agriculture.
- 5. Tourism has vast room to grow.** Residents also indicated a desire for additional recreational opportunities as a workforce recruitment and retention mechanism.

# ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION OBJECTIVES

## Oil, Gas and Energy Development

The economic stability of eastern Montana and western North Dakota is significantly influenced by the continual ups and downs of the oil and gas industry. Between January of 1986 and September of 2024, 2,079 wells have been drilled in Richland County. Based on barrels of oil equivalent production, the County currently ranks 91<sup>st</sup> in the nation. There are 23 active producers in the county ([www.mineralanswers.com](http://www.mineralanswers.com)). Political climate at the state and national level heavily impacts the energy landscape. No argument exists, however, that production and transmission of energy will remain at the top of every administration's agenda. As energy demand continues to rise, the need to continue to utilize traditional fossil fuels, and the consideration of alternative/renewable sources will continue to take priority. As recently as February of 2025, President Trump moved to fast-track upward of 600 permits for a range of energy related infrastructure projects in response to what the President termed "an energy emergency."

The fossil fuel industry itself is changing. There is more efficiency, automation, and technological advances, thereby decreasing the number of labor-hours needed to achieve the same levels of production. Given these factors, focusing on the traditional energy-sector growth from a land use and new development perspective is not helpful. Instead, REDC and the communities it serves should focus on the following:



There are 23  
active producers  
in the county  
([www.mineralanswers.com](http://www.mineralanswers.com)).

## GOAL 1

### **Strengthening and maintaining core infrastructure**

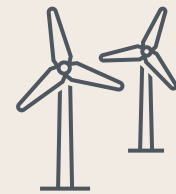
to include water, wastewater, and transportation (roadways) that allow for oil and gas and other alternative energy resource personnel and land development to be sustained.



## GOAL 2

### **Support and encourage the development of wind farms, solar and hydro power.**

These energy sectors have been growing throughout Montana and can bring new workers and tax revenues into area communities while contributing to the energy industry in diversified ways.



## GOAL 3

### **Development of clean energy resources**

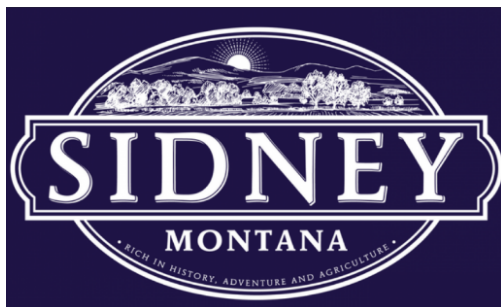
There continues to be an emphasis on the development of a variety of energy resources and the decarbonization of energy that is utilized in this country. Green/Blue hydrogen has been a topic of discussion as a carbon-free fuel source. This source can potentially replace or supplement portions of the existing fossil fuel-based system. The State of North Dakota is currently pursuing a large-scale hydrogen hub in Beulah, North Dakota that would consist of production, storage, and transfer facilities for hydrogen while also connecting the ‘hub’ into a greater hydrogen distribution and storage network throughout the US. Strategic partnerships to explore and build the necessary infrastructure to support this initiative could be an economic diversification avenue. The long-term energy needs of higher populated areas of the western United States have the potential to provide significant economic opportunities for adjacent regions and states due to their capability, land space, and resources to manufacture, store, and transport hydrogen.



## Workforce & Community Development

In most of the public engagement surveys, quality of life is noted as a strength and a primary reason individuals move into and stay in Richland County. Although this area of Montana may not be known for its mountain vistas, the term “wide open spaces” is more relevant and fitting. The area is rich in history. Generations of hard-working families have created a strong legacy. Richland County is the definition of Big Sky Country. And this aura is a major reason that people choose this area to live and work.

Rural does not, however, mean that people do not seek quality-of-life amenities that can be difficult to find, as well as sustain. Housing and access to amenities such as restaurants and family activities were high on the list of challenges in the survey responses and meeting comments.



**REDC will lead strategies outside of Sidney, in the other communities within the county.**

Some of the identified goals and objectives are strategies being implemented by REDC or their partners. The work by the Sidney Chamber of Commerce is worthy of note. Several of the outlined workforce and community development goals and objectives are being addressed and/or are underway. In those instances, REDC is excited to partner with the Sidney Chamber to support and develop those activities within Sidney. REDC will lead these strategies outside of Sidney in the other communities within the county. The following goals have been established to foster resilience and diversification in the workforce and community, supporting heightened economic stability.



## GOAL 1

### Provide a multi-functional business development facility



Research completed by the Regional Economic Development Institute at Colorado State University points to the trend that rural areas are more entrepreneurial. According to that study, 33% of the job growth in the United States comes from start-up companies. Montana is considered one of the top states for entrepreneurship, often ranking as the number one state for starting a small business. This is due to its favorable business climate, low taxes, and high number of new businesses opening.

Even so, starting and maintaining a business is not for the faint of heart. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, approximately 20% of new businesses fail within their first year in the US. This rate increases to 45% within 5 years, and a staggering 65% within 10 years. Multiple factors can influence these statistics. According to the public engagement survey results, the primary obstacles for new businesses in Richland County included workforce challenges, a small population and the rural location, lack of community support, and scarcity of start-up capital.

For a business to succeed, financial support and community resources are critical. While this fortification is sometimes in the form of providing financial or human capital, this reinforcement often occurs as technical support and customer understanding of community assets. Providing a space for sharing resources, information, motivation, and enhancing the methods of businesses to learn, grow, and share resources is critical to success. This should include those resources as identified in the second goal, outlined below, for redeployment of workforce and access to existing resources such as the revolving loan fund.

According to a Colorado State University research,

**Rural areas  
are more  
entrepreneurial**

Montana is  
considered one of  
the **top states for  
entrepreneurship**

For a business to  
succeed, **financial  
support and  
community  
resources are  
critical**



## GOAL 2

Diversify jobs through re-deployment of existing human resources



Economic disruptions and shocks, like the closure of Sidney Sugar in 2023, can devastate a community. A shock can leave sometimes hundreds of workers without employment, creating a sense of fear, loss, and chaos that reverberates throughout the region. While communities often respond to crisis quickly “in the moment,” having redeployment and related resources at the ready can assist in recovering faster and keeping more workforce within the community.

Redeployment of the workforce takes many forms. There are significant barriers, most notably finding new employment with similar compensation. Statistically, regardless of local or business efforts, approximately 33% of workers will relocate, and another 33% will retire or retire early. This departure leaves 34% of the workforce that can be targeted for other jobs within the community. Efforts to support and redeploy that population should be done preemptively and include:

**Development of programming and financial assistance** for job training

**Improved access to secondary education and trade schools**

Enhanced virtual options that connect the workforce remotely to educational institutions and training programs

**Improved access to college credits and trade courses**

Building improved partnerships with programs that meet specific workforce needs

**Advance access to regional, state, and federal resources**

that assist in workforce training and redeployment.

**Partnership with businesses to create specific on-the-job training programs**

Address workforce development for existing businesses seeking to expand and grow.

**Development of marketing and public communications** to alert the community, and their prospective employers, aware of the services available to them and their workforce, especially in times of cutbacks, lay-offs, or business closures.

### GOAL 3

#### Turn Competition into Opportunity



Community members and leaders do not always have a choice in the types of businesses that open in their communities. Depending on zoning, business incentives, and community will, sometimes businesses open that are perceived by community members as advantageous but are seen by other business owners as a threat. This perception is most frequently seen when large retailers, “box stores,” move into small communities. Often called “category killers,” these stores offer a broad range of products at reduced prices that create availability and convenience for consumers. The same affordability, however, can threaten the loss of smaller, local businesses. Their withdrawal can create a loss of community character, and, if they should close, leave abandoned and unsightly buildings and infrastructure.

While these are legitimate concerns, there are creative solutions and partnerships that help to diversify particularly retail economic vitality and drive engagement for local businesses, rather than threaten them. Those include:

**Assisting downtown retailers in creating unique niches**, such as bookstores and hardware stores, to offer specialty products and exceptional customer service that cannot be replicated by larger “chain” stores

**Emphasizing and marketing personalized service**, curated product lines, and the ability to order specialty items to meet customer needs

**Exploration of collaborative promotional agreements** with larger retail stores that might include utilizing double-sided advertisement cards in customer bags to cross-promote: (one side advertising downtown events to encourage foot traffic and the other advertising a special at the larger/box store)

**Creating downtown events that highlight smaller, locally owned** and operated “clusters” of businesses and inviting participation from other, larger retailers

*The Sidney Chamber of Commerce is currently leading similar events.*

*REDC would like to expand this effort to additional communities within the county*

## GOAL 4

### Incentivizing Businesses and Workforce

Attracting businesses and related workforce talent can take many forms. The County, towns and economic development agencies should consider some of the following incentives to entice and encourage providers, businesses, and related workforce into the community:



#### **Reduced/subsidized housing (as part of a signing bonus or benefit package).**

The City and County are leading this effort in Sidney. REDC will consider this for other unincorporated communities/county locations



#### **Assistance with ongoing education and training or tuition payments**

This assistance is especially useful for specialty medical providers who receive some tuition forgiveness for their service in rural communities



**Collaboration between businesses in the same industry** to allow flexible or rotating scheduling in which employees can serve multiple locations and/or communities in the county part-time

## GOAL 5

Encourage youth and family engagement early and often



“The youth are our future” may sound cliched and overused. But it is the truth. Young people often leave their hometowns to pursue education, find better job opportunities, gain independence, experience world life, or explore a wider range of lifestyles. They do also come home. In fact, according to a recent Census study, around 5% of movers in the United States are considered “return-home-movers.” This percentage is higher for rural states. Family is the number one reason for this decision. There is also a percentage of young people who return after discovering the grass was not greener somewhere else. The return-to-home movers are becoming prevalent enough that some states and communities are even creating specialized marketing campaigns just to target this group.

While engaging younger generations can be difficult and requires some creativity, involving young people in community planning and decisions can lead to better outcomes for them and the community. For young people, their involvement creates positive development, leadership skills, civic pride, and empowerment. For the community, their involvement can create social transformation, but also builds trust and respect, a sense of overall community safety, and increased sustainability that can lead to a stronger and more diverse economic base. The Sidney Chamber of Commerce and the Sidney school district are leading these efforts with significant success. REDC is interested in expanding these efforts throughout Richland County.

### Objectives to be considered include:

- **Establishing a community youth advisory council** to actively participate in community planning and project implementation
- **Partnering with schools and youth organizations** such as Richland Youth Hockey, Sidney Saddle Club, Boys & Girls Club of Richland, Scouts of America (Badlands District), and others to host, co-host and plan community-led activities, such as sports tournaments, art shows, and downtown gatherings.
- **Collaborating with local stakeholders** to create family-friendly spaces and events like outdoor movie nights, farmers’ markets with kid zones, and entrepreneur business plan contests
- **Enhancing telecommunications** options such as high-speed internet, providing a younger, tech-savvy generation with the opportunity to live a modern life in a rural setting



## Agriculture and Food Production

Agriculture continues to be a primary economic driver in Richland County and in Montana. It is key to both maintaining the economic health and providing opportunities for growth and diversification. Agriculture is unpredictable and often influenced by factors outside human control such as weather. The REDC CEDS outlines goals related to continuing to support agricultural land use and to increase access for additional generations of workers to consider farming and ranching as a career. Diversification goals are targeted at ways to expand agricultural influence, general community and visitor understanding of agriculture, and to create value-added industries with agriculture at their core.





## GOAL 1

### Support countywide “food pathways” and creation of a local food systems plan



In Montana, a significant percentage of agricultural products produced are shipped or exported out of state. Based on USDA data the State of Montana produced a market value of \$3.5 billion dollars in agricultural products. Of that, only \$9.8 million dollars or 2.8% was sold directly to the Montana consumer. The current scale of operations and types of products produced by the agricultural industry may align with a farm-to-table approach within the County. Population density may also not be present to support such an initiative. However, despite previous trends towards larger farming operations and the inherent efficiency of moving products in bulk, recent increases in fuel prices, the nationwide shortage of truck drivers, and concerns about vehicle emissions do provide an opening for more localized food systems and food pathways.

There is considerable growth in this area. And there is interest in both the state and federal levels that might encourage exploration of an increased REDC coalition collaborating with agriculture producers, the 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 objectives and action steps support local and regional food pathways and systems that encourage ongoing agricultural economic development and diversification.

**Continued support and knowledge growth** of the importance of local, regional, and family scale food production that is sustainable. Examples of ways in which this may be accomplished include:

**Promotional campaigns** highlighting local and regional growers and farm-to-table opportunities

**Events and community gatherings** that highlight agricultural endeavors and seek to promote county or community level uniqueness

**Opportunities for non-agriculture-based community members** to engage in agricultural endeavors (including promotion of agritourism opportunities)

## GOAL 2

Leverage agricultural and natural resources to diversify the use of agricultural land:

**Value-added agriculture is the process of increasing the value of agricultural products, including crops and livestock.**

This bolstering can be done in a variety of ways, but the general idea is to reduce costs while increasing revenue and diversity of products and production methods.

**Typically, value-added agriculture focuses on**

- 1) Production or manufacturing processes
- 2) Marketing to increase the value of the product
- 3) Increasing the appeal of a product to the consumer



These activities and processes are in constant flux. They are significantly impacted by determining what consumers want and then the creation or manufacturing products with those attributes.

**This is being driven by:**

- Increased consumer demands regarding health, nutrition, and convenience
- Efforts by food processors to improve productivity
- Technological advances that enable producers to produce what consumers desire

Expanding, diversifying, or changing the ways in which agricultural and ranching are done can be a delicate and difficult discussion. Like business closures and downturns in oil and gas, these discussions are often only after there is a devastating loss, closure, or fiscal crisis. Exploratory and planning discussions facilitate readiness, which creates better economic stability.



**The following are identified tasks related to consideration of value-added agriculture.**

- **Convene local producers to discuss value-added agriculture options** that diversify traditional agriculture and livestock production. This dialogue can include the creation of co-ops or investment in grain elevators, ethanol plants, biofuel production, biogas production, or chemical production. On-site or regional production reduces transportation costs and increases local capacity.
- **Assist (or partner with current, proactive agencies)** in conducting and understanding research related to consumer demands, technological advances, and ways to improve productivity and processing. This partnership would share this information with local producers, aiding them in determining best land use to meet anticipated consumer demand.
- **Promote the county's natural resources and biodiverse ecosystems** by identifying small-scale, low-cost ecotourism opportunities (e.g., hunting and fishing events).
- **Explore and consider opportunities in Agritourism.** This public inclusion gives producers an opportunity to generate additional income and is an avenue for direct marketing to consumers. It enhances and diversifies the tourism industry by increasing the volume of visitors to the area and the length of their stay. According to Allied Market Research, the agritourism market size is valued at \$51.3 million and is estimated to reach \$63 million by 2027. This supports the tourism and visitor market and addresses value-added agricultural growth.

## High Tech Industry and Entrepreneurship

In 2023, Richland County experienced a 27% increase in GDP. Despite that, the county's ranking for high-tech industry employment remained the same, ranking 1,951 out of 3,110 counties. This score suggests there is enormous economic diversification opportunity in recruitment of technology-driven industry to the county.

### **This recruitment entails two primary strategies:**

- 1) Expansion of broadband services to increase remote interest and capacity
- 2) Attracting technology-based companies to locate to Richland County





## GOAL 1

Expand broadband services to increase economic, educational, and innovation capacity

Broadband Now has reported that only 68% of Montanans have wired broadband coverage of 25 megabytes per second (mbps) for downloads and 3 mbps for uploads. This disparity is in comparison to neighboring states of Wyoming (72%), North Dakota (89%) and South Dakota (85%).

([www.broadbandnow.com/Montana](http://www.broadbandnow.com/Montana)).

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provided significant federal money to states for investment in broadband infrastructure. The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program is designed to expand high-speed internet access to underserved and unserved areas across the United States, and provides funding for infrastructure deployment, planning, and adoption programs.

States were required to create and submit a broadband deployment plan and are currently in the process of adjusting those plans to meet new federal administration priorities and guidance. The future of BEAD funding is uncertain. However, it is expected broadband will continue to be a priority, allowing states and communities the chance to expand broadband and create connections.



**An assessment of the broadband status in Richland County is needed to help propel the economy.** Broadband expansion is critical to delivering distance education, fostering business growth, and meeting changing health care practices. A key action in this goal is to work with the State and the County to develop or understand the telecommunications/ information systems plan, assuring that there are necessary investments into this infrastructure moving forward. This can include:

- **Partnering with surrounding counties** and other economic development agencies and appropriate utilities to either develop a telecommunications system plan, or if one exists, utilize to identify existing capabilities, potential uses, and project needs.
- **Encourage the state to utilize BEAD** and other money to invest in broadband in Richland County.

## GOAL 2

### Attract Technology-Based Companies to Locate in Richland County



This step requires additional partnerships with the state and with already existing agencies and companies doing work in the technology sectors. In Montana, this relationship might include a partnership with Montana Innovative Partnership (MTIP) [MIP](#) to attract high quality, technology-based employees, and companies. Strengthening the entrepreneurial eco-system in Richland County might also include educational opportunities, partnering with state-wide start up initiatives, and designating space. Goal 1 under Workforce and Community Development (above) outlines creating a designated space not just for tech-based companies and entrepreneurs, but for all small business owners, supporting these efforts in a more community-based and intentional manner.

Due to its large land area and low population density, Richland County could potentially serve as a Data Center hub. As the use of artificial intelligence (AI) spreads worldwide, its infrastructure is also taking up more space on the ground. While this is a significant change to a community landscape, it can be an economic driver. Data centers often provide work opportunities in operations and facilities management, IT engineering, and various business roles that include sales and marketing and business development. Before data centers open their doors, the facility's design and construction takes a wide array of skilled labor and professional support. Ideally, these are locally or regionally hired workers.

#### Tasks related to this goal might include:

- **Meeting with MTIP and the Governor's Office of Economic Development** to understand needs on a statewide level
- **Partnering with the state and site-locators** to ensure that any commercial and industrial property
- **Search for research companies** that utilize data centers and want to expand their footprint
  - Create interest in rural Montana as a site location
  - Possibly repurpose the Sidney Sugar facility
- **Partner with state and regional business incubators** to attract early-stage businesses that are still developing and might find Richland County attractive for long-term operations.



## Transportation and Community Infrastructure



Infrastructure, especially for transportation, is essential throughout the country. Perhaps it is no more essential than in rural areas in which access is often limited. Impassable or unsafe roadways can lead to a complete halt of commerce and significant safety risk for residents.

When considering the recruitment and retention of businesses and related workforce, the ability to move goods and people between Richland County, the State of Montana, and the country at large is essential. Ensuring a reliable and safe transportation system allows businesses to access a wider range of markets, resources, and labor pools. This access facilitates the development of new businesses and industries and promotes a more varied economic landscape.

**Trails, sidewalks, and biking routes enhance accessibility to jobs, services, and businesses and are in the top 5 “amenities” considered by those seeking to relocate.**

Non-motorized transportation infrastructure is equally important in economic development and diversification. Development of trails, sidewalks, and biking routes enhance accessibility to jobs, services, and businesses. They add to the quality of life and sense of community in a place and are in the top 5 “amenities” considered by those seeking to relocate.

The REDC CEDS outlines recommendations for a Countywide Comprehensive Transportation Safety Action Plan that will lay the groundwork for identifying critical transportation infrastructure, prioritizing transportation needs, and outlining potential strategies and funding resources to address identified needs. In consideration of resilience and diversification, REDC should also consider:



## GOAL 1

### Inclusion of Weather Resilience Planning

Weather conditions in Richland County can be brutal with considerable temperature variation throughout the year. Summers are hot and humid, and winters can be long, cold, and dry. This, temperature disparity, in combination with the volume of truck traffic (between 11-12% on Hwy 200 between Sidney and Fairview in 2023). Total Average Daily Traffic (ADT) of 4,499, creates significant wear and tear on the primary (and sometimes secondary) roads in the County.

Any future transportation plans should incorporate design features that allow the system to withstand disruptions from weather and natural disasters, ensuring consistent, accessible, and safe travel.

**Rehabilitation and reconstruction of existing infrastructure should consider:**

- **Redundancy** in routes
- **Elevating roads** in flood-prone areas
- Utilizing **weather-resistant materials**
- Ensuring regular **maintenance**
- Conducting **vulnerability assessments**
- **Proactive planning** for disaster recovery strategies



**When individuals and businesses are looking at a “quality of life” determination, connectivity and access play a key role.**

Transportation is essential to economic development and diversification strategy.

## 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 (about \$11 per person in the US) annually to the Montana economy. In 2023, an estimated 12.5 million nonresident visitors came to Montana. In state travelers alone contributed \$1.1 billion in tourism dollars.

Even during the pandemic, tourism in Montana remained a viable industry providing "social distancing" simply due to its low population density. Capturing tourists and tourism opportunities will assist the County in diversification. The following goals should be considered in growing and diversifying the tourism industry and visitor opportunities:

### Tourism is one of Montana's leading industries

In 2023, an estimated  
**12.5 million**  
nonresident visitors  
came to Montana

In state travelers alone contributed  
**\$1.1 billion**  
in tourism dollars.





## GOAL 1

### Develop “specialized” tours and attractions

Tourists are often seeking unique, extraordinary, and one-of-a-kind experiences. Events and programs that provide excitement and destination opportunities can drive tourism and create experiences for visitors that will bring repeat visitation.



- **Work with businesses and communities** to identify and capitalize on events, retrieval experiences, and outdoor opportunities unique to the County.
  - The Sidney Chamber spearheads a popular Christmas Stroll in Sidney. This event is an excellent catalyst for expanding activities to include other communities/locations throughout the county.
- **Where there are unique products or services** produced or provided in the County, create events and marketing campaigns specific to those. (Example: Craig’s Smokehouse & Jerky Company in Savage)
- **Develop a comprehensive list** of possible place-based, cultural, ecotourism, and agritourism activities that can be marketed to visitors
- **Develop a marketing campaign** that enhances the image of vibrant communities in rural America and enhances visitor understanding of the County and the regional culture. This campaign can include community stories, short video clips, and updated branding on community websites and social media channels.
- **Agritourism opportunities should also be considered.** These objectives and activities have been included in Diversification Goal 2, in Agriculture and Food Production.



## GOAL 1

Consider attraction of non-traditional travelers (specifically motorcyclists and bicyclists)



No longer just for the athletic elite, bike tours are becoming one of the fastest-growing trends 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 at a closer level. With its wide-open spaces, and small-town appeal, Richland County has potential 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. Encouraging these visitors also opens opportunities for businesses that support bicycling (and motorcycling).

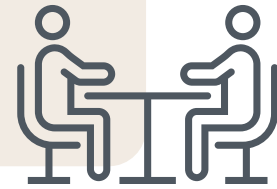


**Travelers are seeking out bike tours** to stay active, minimize environmental impact, and experience diverse landscapes at a closer level.



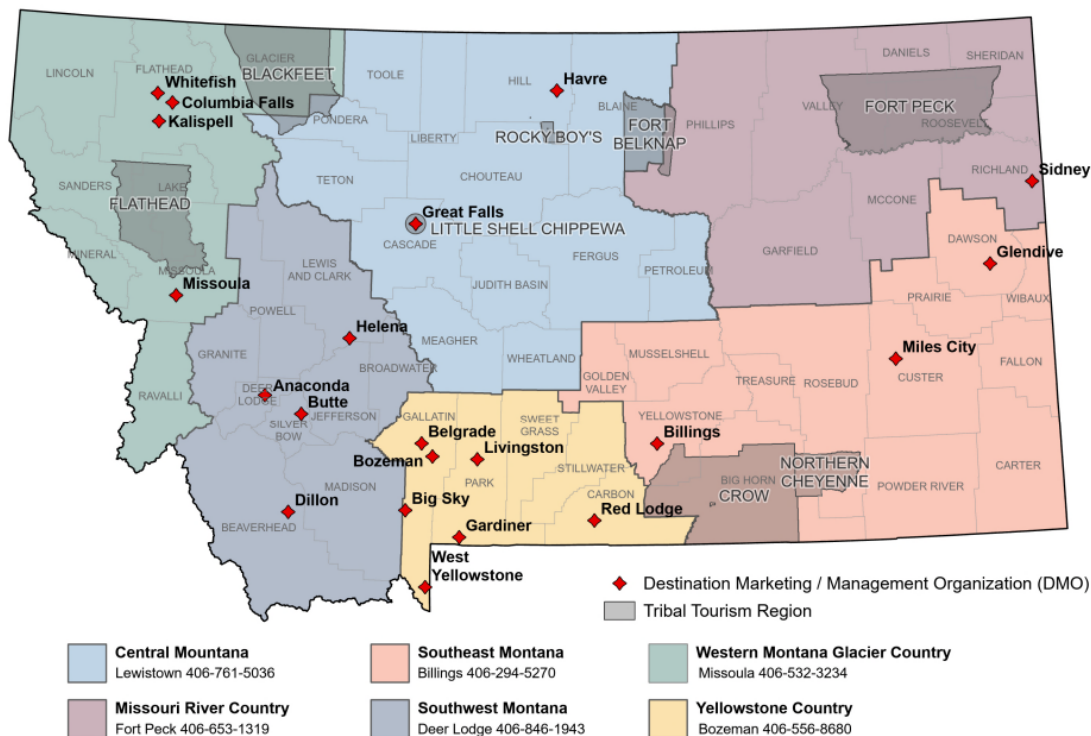
### GOAL 3

Partner regionally and statewide to promote Montana tourism



Tourism plays such an enormous role in the Montana economy that there are multiple organizations both regionally and throughout the state focusing only on tourism. For that reason, there is no need to reinvent the wheel, and potential significant benefits to forming more formal partnerships with some of those organizations. These include the Office of Tourism, the Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association, the Institute for Tourism and Recreation, and Visit Montana.

#### Montana Tourism Regions



There are 6 tourism regions and 21 Destination and Marketing/Management Organizations, including the Sidney Chamber of Commerce. Descriptions and a list of all those services can be found at [Department of Commerce](#).

While it is understood that REDC is not the primary tourism agency in Richland County, partnership with these types of groups is important to economic development and diversification to better understand those resources and contribute expertise.



## **Appendices**

# **Appendix A**

## **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis Report**

## **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis Report**

The SWOT analysis is a tool used in the CEDS and Economic Diversification Strategy process to identify the advantages of the County that will make it competitive on a local, regional, national and/or global scale. This process can also be utilized to identify factors that might limit the County's ability to realize its potential or make it difficult to take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

Public outreach, some of which included SWOT analysis began in December 2024. This included a series of "pop-up" meetings in which Richland County and their contracted staff would "pop-up" at various locations within the County and meet with citizens to request survey participation, and scheduled meetings with higher-level stakeholders and elected officials. The survey tool utilized included questions targeting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats requesting respondents identify the greatest county/community assets, biggest needs, opportunities for business growth that would enhance/sustain the economy and obstacles that new businesses and community development might face moving forward. Additionally, the survey added questions that provided more in-depth and specific information to Richland County, allowing goals, objectives, and action items to be tailored to best meet community perception and need.

Some of the traditional verbiage was altered to better encompass community vision. For instance, "strengths" were framed as "assets" or "greatest economic strengths." "Need" was utilized instead of weakness and "new business and community development opportunities" was utilized to obtain information regarding general "opportunities."

Commonalities and themes arising from the SWOT analysis are as follows:

### **Strengths**

Survey responses and input at the stakeholder meetings indicated strengths to be sense of community/quality of life (70 percent), safe communities (49 percent) and agriculture (44 percent) as the top 3 identified regional strengths. Additionally, schools/education, access to basic health care, opportunities for small businesses, and employment opportunities were also listed in lessening percentages.

### **Weaknesses**

Areas of need/weaknesses were more diverse than identified strengths/assets, however, again, there was commonality in at least three-five areas. These included entertainment options for all ages, retaining and expanding new and existing businesses, and more programs/activities specifically for children. In addition, revitalization of downtown areas, more parks and recreation opportunities, access to specialized health care services, and better infrastructure were also prioritized.

## **Opportunities**

When asked about what industries/businesses and activities had the most opportunity for growth and where there might be ongoing opportunities, retail, agriculture, and recreation ranked most highly. Additionally, respondents indicated they believed there were additional opportunities in energy, service industries, health care services, and manufacturing that might diversify the County's economy and provide opportunities for worker recruitment and retention.

## **Threats**

Like many communities/regions in Montana, the primary threat/challenge identified was workforce and the ability to recruit and retain qualified and ample workforce. The isolated location and small populations in Richland County was considered a significant threat/obstacle to workforce, but lack of community support, start-up capital, local/state/federal regulations, not knowing where to go and who to contact for financial or technical assistance, and lack of commercial real estate were also listed as contributing factors/threats to business recruitment/development within the region.

A copy of the survey, summary of public engagement and stakeholder meetings, and a summary of public engagement input/survey results including demographics and total number of surveys received is also attached in the appendix. A short summary of overall public and stakeholder input is also included in the CEDS under "Summary of Stakeholder Input."

# **Appendix B**

## **Action Plan Workbook**

# ACTION PLAN WORKBOOK

## ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES (EDS)

### Richland Economic Development Corporation (REDC)

#### Companion Action Plan Worksheet and Task Organization/Assignments

#### Oil, Gas and Energy Development

Task	Assigned To	Completion Yr	Status
<b>Goal 1: Strengthen and maintain core infrastructure</b>			
<b>Goal 2: Support the development of wind farms, solar, and hydropower</b>			
<b>Goal 3: Development of clean energy resources</b>			
<b>Workforce and Community Development</b>			
<b>Goal 1: Provide a multi-functional business development facility</b>			
<b>Goal 2: Diversify jobs through re-deployment of existing human resources</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Development of programming and financial assistance for job training			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Improved access to college credits and trade courses through partnerships that meet specific workforce needs			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Advance access to regional, state, and federal resources that assist in workforce training and redeployment			
<b>Objective 4:</b> Create/grow partnerships with businesses to create specific on-the-job training programs			
<b>Objective 5:</b> Development of marketing and public communications to alert the community of services available to employers and workforce			
<b>Goal 3: Turn Competition into Opportunity</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Assist downtown retailers in creating unique niches to offer specialty products and exceptional customer service			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Collaborative promotional agreements with larger retail stores			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Downtown events that highlight smaller, locally owned and operated clusters of businesses and inviting participation from other, larger retailers			
<b>Goal 4: Incentivize Businesses and Workforce</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Reduced/subsidized housing (as part of signing bonuses or benefit packages)			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Assistance with ongoing education and training or tuition payments			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Collaboration between businesses in the same industry to allow flexible or rotating scheduling to allow employees to serve multiple locations and/or communities part-time			
<b>Goal 5: Encourage youth and family engagement early and often</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Establish a community youth advisory council			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Partner with schools & youth organizations to host, co-host and plan community-led activities & downtown gatherings			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Collaborate to create family0friendly spaces and events			
<b>Objective 4:</b> Enhance telecommunication options providing opportunities to the younger, tech-savvy generation to live a modern life in a rural setting			



**ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES (EDS)**  
**Richland Economic Development Corporation (REDC)**  
**Companion Action Plan Worksheet and Task Organization/Assignments**

**Agriculture and Food Production**

Task	Assigned To	Completion Yr	Status
<b>Goal 1: Support countywide food pathways and creation of a local food systems plan</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Continued support and knowledge growth of the importance of local, regional, and family scale food production that is sustainable			
<b>Goal 2: Leverage agricultural and natural resources to diversify the use of agricultural land</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Convene local producers to discuss value-added agriculture options that diversify traditional production			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Assist in conducting and understanding research related to consumer demands, technological advances, and ways to improve productivity and processing			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Promote the county's natural resources and biodiverse ecosystems by identifying small scale, low-cost ecotourism opportunities			
<b>Objective 4:</b> Explore opportunities in Agritourism			

**High Tech Industry and Entrepreneurship**

<b>Goal 1: Expand broadband services to increase economic, educational, and innovation capacity</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Partner with surrounding counties, other economic development agencies, and utilities to either develop a telecommunications system plan, or if one exists, utilize to identify existing capabilities, potential uses, and project needs			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Encourage the state to utilize BEAD and other money to invest in broadband in Richland County			
<b>Goal 2: Attract technology-based companies to locate in Richland County</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Meet with MTIP and the Governor's Office of Economic Development to understand needs on a statewide level			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Partner with the state and site-locators to ensure that any commercial and industrial property is listed			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Search for research companies that utilize data centers and want to expand their footprint			
<b>Objective 4:</b> Partner with state and regional business incubators to attract early-stage businesses that are still developing that might find Richland County attractive for long-term operations			

**Transportation and Community Infrastructure**

<b>Goal 1: Develop specialized tours and attractions</b>			
<b>Objective 1:</b> Work with businesses and communities to identify and capitalize on events, retail experiences, and outdoor opportunities unique to the County			
<b>Objective 2:</b> Where there are unique products or services produced or provided in the County, create events and marketing campaigns specific to those.			

**ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGIES (EDS)**  
**Richland Economic Development Corporation (REDC)**  
**Companion Action Plan Worksheet and Task Organization/Assignments**  
**Transportation and Community Infrastructure (Continued)**

Task	Assigned To	Completion Yr	Status
<b>Goal 1: (Continued) Develop specialized tours and attractions</b>			
<b>Objective 3:</b> Develop a comprehensive list of possible place-based, cultural, ecotourism, and agritourism activities that can be marketed to visitors			
<b>Objective 4:</b> Develop a marketing campaign that enhances the image of vibrant communities in rural America and enhances visitors' understanding of the County and the regional culture			
<b>Objective 5:</b> Consider agritourism opportunities			
<b>Goal 2: Consider attraction of non-traditional travelers (especially motorcyclists and bicyclists)</b>			
<b>Goal 3: Partner regionally and statewide to promote Montana tourism</b>			

# Appendix C

## Public Engagement Survey

## Richland County Economic Diversification & CEDS Survey

1. How long have you resided in Richland County?

- |                                   |   |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> 0-5 years   | <input type="radio"/> 20+ years         |
| <input type="radio"/> 6-10 years  | <input type="radio"/> Seasonal Resident |
| <input type="radio"/> 11-20 years | <input type="radio"/> Visitor           |

2. What do you see as Richland County's greatest assets, or what makes it stand out? List your top 3.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of community / quality of life | <input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for small businesses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Affordable housing                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Safe communities                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parks and recreational opportunities | <input type="checkbox"/> Restaurants and entertainment      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Access to healthcare                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Employment opportunities           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Schools / education                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Tourism opportunities              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strong local economy                 | <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)               |   |

3. What areas do you see as Richland County's biggest needs or areas that Richland County can improve? Pick your top 3.

- ☐ Enhancing telecommunications and broadband
- ☐ Help retain and expand new and existing businesses
- ☐ Provide better local infrastructure (including transportation, water/sewer, garbage services, etc.)
- ☐ Better access to healthcare services
- ☐ Provide better or more educational opportunities
- ☐ Provide better housing options
- ☐ Provide more programs and services for senior citizens
- ☐ Provide more programs / activities for kids
- ☐ Provide more entertainment for all ages
- ☐ Have more job opportunities
- ☐ Revitalize downtown areas (storefronts, signage)
- ☐ Provide more parks and recreational opportunities
- ☐ Provide public transportation access / options
- ☐ Better public safety
- ☐ Tourism business opportunities



4. Which business industries have the most “growth potential” in Richland County?

Pick your top 3.

☐ Value added Agriculture

☐ Tourism businesses

☐ Manufacturing

☐ Health care services

☐ Retail

☐ Technology

☐ Financial services

☐ Service industries

☐ Energy

☐ Recreation

☐ Other (please specify)

5. Based on your top choices from question (#4) above, what TYPES of business would you like to see in Richland County? Pick your top 3.

- ☐ Traditional Ag (farming and ranching)
- ☐ Value added Ag (meat, grain, alfalfa, corn soybean processing, distilling, brewing, etc.)
- ☐ Ag equipment and supplies (retail)
- ☐ Specific health care providers (dental, eye, therapies, etc.)
- ☐ Small manufacturing (components, welding, metal works, etc.)
- ☐ Retail / service (cosmetology, clothing, pet grooming, home improvement)
- ☐ Entertainment / Activities (movies, indoor recreation, music, theater)
- ☐ Legal, CPA, engineering, architectural
- ☐ Construction, plumbing, electrical, concrete
- ☐ Restaurants / Bars / Coffee shops
- ☐ Energy businesses (wind, solar, natural gas, oil, business support)
- ☐ Remote workspace / coworking opportunities
- ☐ Other (please specify)

6. What do you see as some of the obstacles for new businesses to open in Richland County?

- ☐ Lack of local infrastructure or utilities
- ☐ Local/state/federal regulations (red tape)
- ☐ Lack of community support
- ☐ Population and/or location
- ☐ Local taxes
- ☐ Lack of commercial real estate
- ☐ Workforce challenges
- ☐ Startup capital
- ☐ Not knowing where to go and who to contact
- ☐ Other (please specify)

7. What changes would you like to see in Richland County?

8. What type of economic development services do you believe would help businesses be more successful? Pick your top 3

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rethinking my business model         | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial & credit analysis                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Marketing & Social media assistance  | <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying local resources & networking opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Technical & licensing assistance     | <input type="checkbox"/> Website development                                    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Strategic planning & business growth | <input type="checkbox"/> E-Commerce platform & digital presence                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership & workforce training      |   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify)               |   |

9. In order to achieve long-term economic stability and increase economic resilience, please rate the importance of the following challenges:

	Very Important	Important	Moderately Important	Of Little Importance	Unimportant
Aging and inadequate infrastructure/services (broadband, water, sewer, roads)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Not enough land and buildings ready for job-creating businesses to locate	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lack of housing, homelessness, workforce housing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Wildfires, winds, drought, and other natural disasters	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Worker and skill shortage	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Improve visitor amenities (restaurants, lodging, signage)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Ease government regulations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Support for entrepreneurs and small businesses	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Fill downtown vacancies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Grow and diversify the existing visitor market	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Loss of business, industry and tax base	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Environmental issues	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. Please provide any additional comments regarding growth / development in Richland County / your community.

# Appendix D

## Public Engagement Survey Results



## SURVEY RESULTS SUMMARY

# ECONOMIC DIVERSIFICATION & CEDS SURVEY

### Survey Conducted

December 2024 – January 2025

279 Responses

**RICHLAND COUNTY**  
**ECONOMIC**  
**STRATEGY**

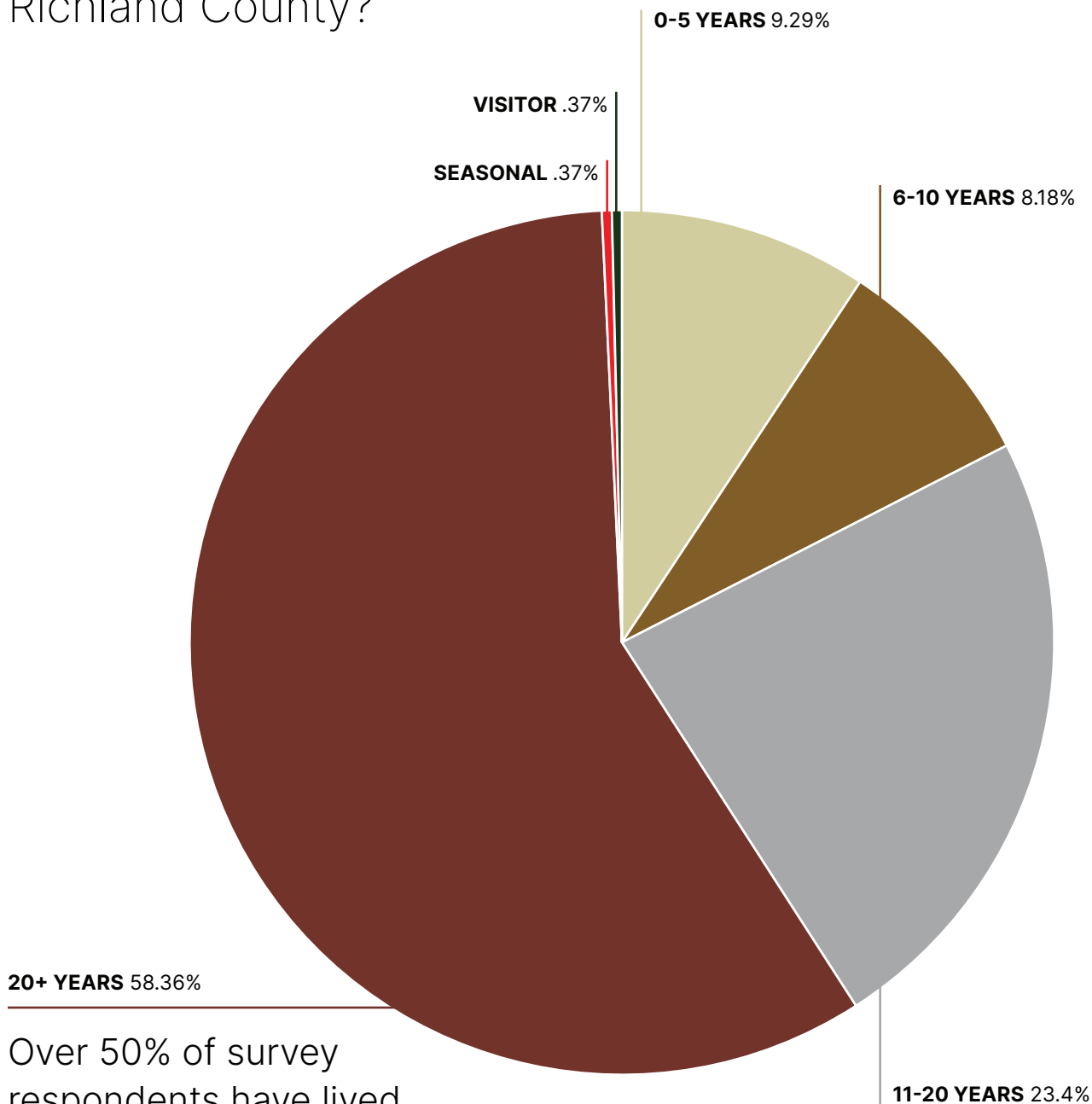


GROWTH. OUR WAY.

richland  
**redc.**  
economic development corp

## QUESTION 1

How long have  
you resided in  
Richland County?



Over 50% of survey  
respondents have lived  
in Richland County for  
**20+ years.**

## QUESTION 2

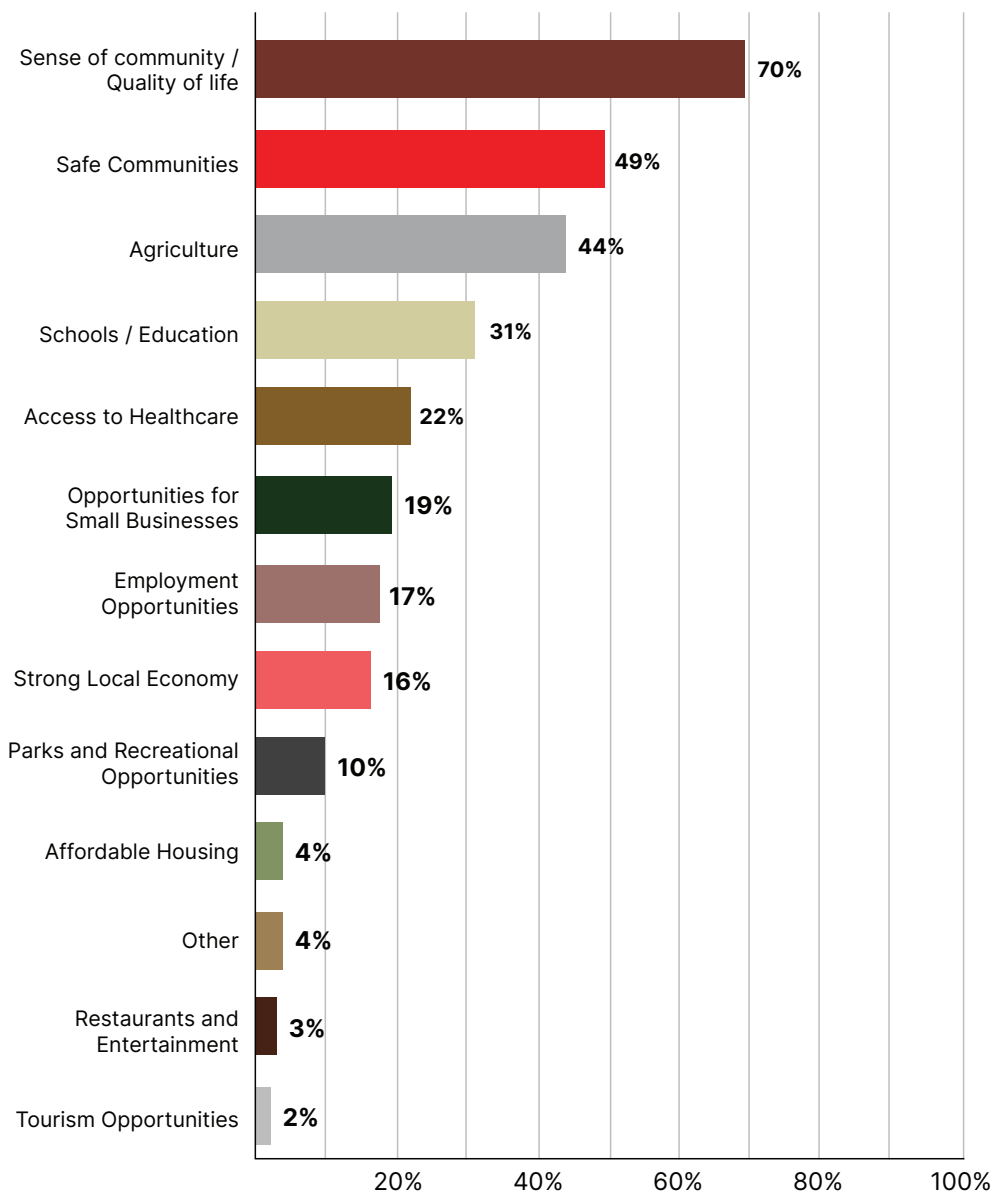
What do you see as Richland County's **greatest assets**, or what makes it stand out? List your top 3.

### TOP 3 RESPONSES

Sense of community /  
quality of life

Safe  
Communities

Agriculture



### QUESTION 3

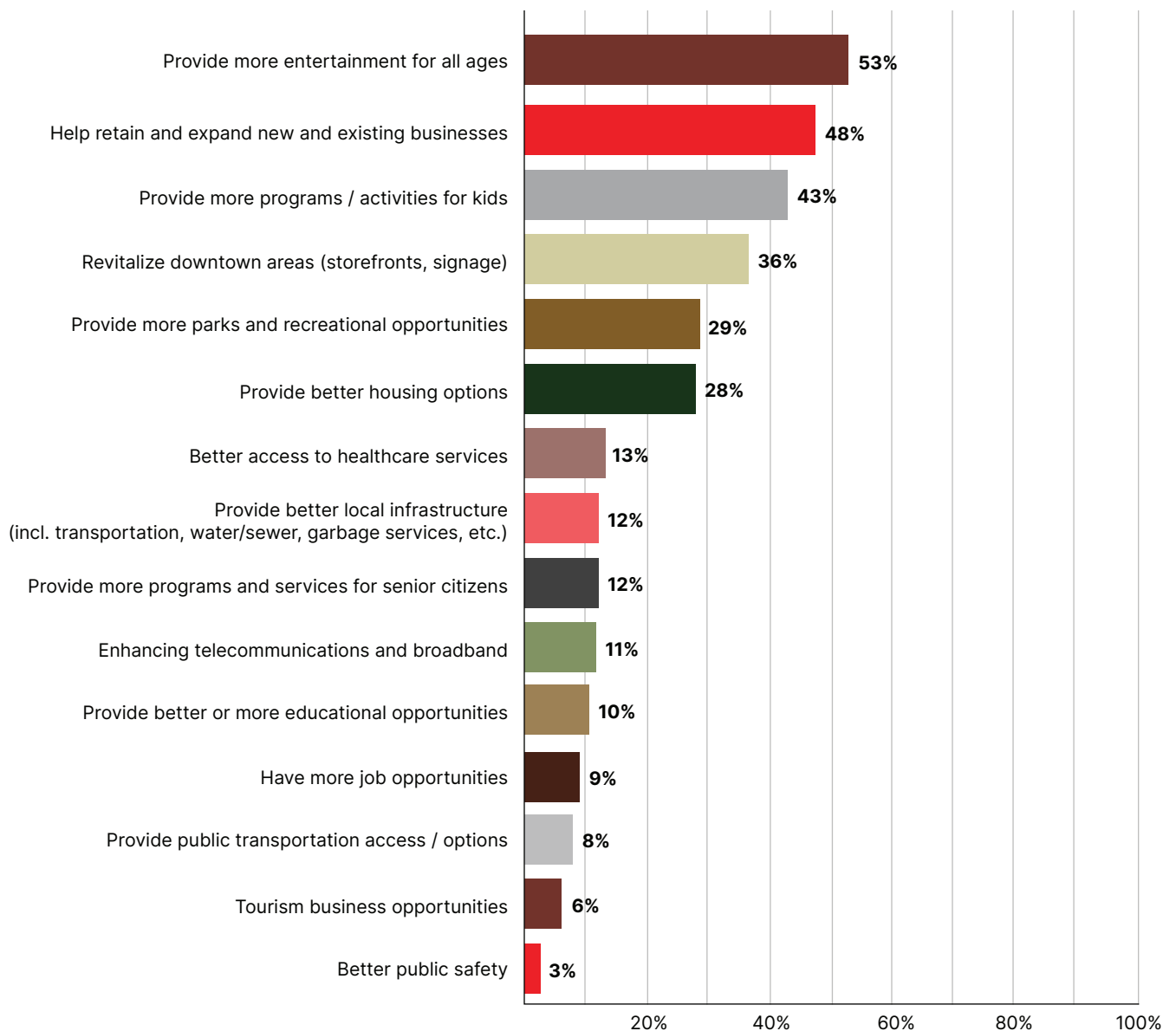
What areas do you see as Richland County's **biggest needs** or areas that Richland County can improve? Pick your top 3.

Over half of respondents see a need for **more entertainment for all ages**.

*Programming for kids is specifically requested.*

Respondents also identified a need to **support businesses** and downtown areas.

Tourism and public safety are seen as needing the **least improvement**.



#### QUESTION 4

Which business industries have the most **“growth potential”** in Richland County? Pick your top 3.

##### TOP 5 RESPONSES

Retail

Value Added  
Agriculture

Recreation

Energy

Services Industries

##### “OTHER” RESPONSES INCLUDED

**“Grain and commodities** storage and transport”

**“Plumbing, Electrical, Construction jobs,**  
provide apprentice program for youth  
training or retraining - Job Work center  
or Job Corps center”

**“Rental/event** businesses”

**“Mental health** services and  
counseling, **Education”**

**“Big Box** Retail”

**“Daycare”**

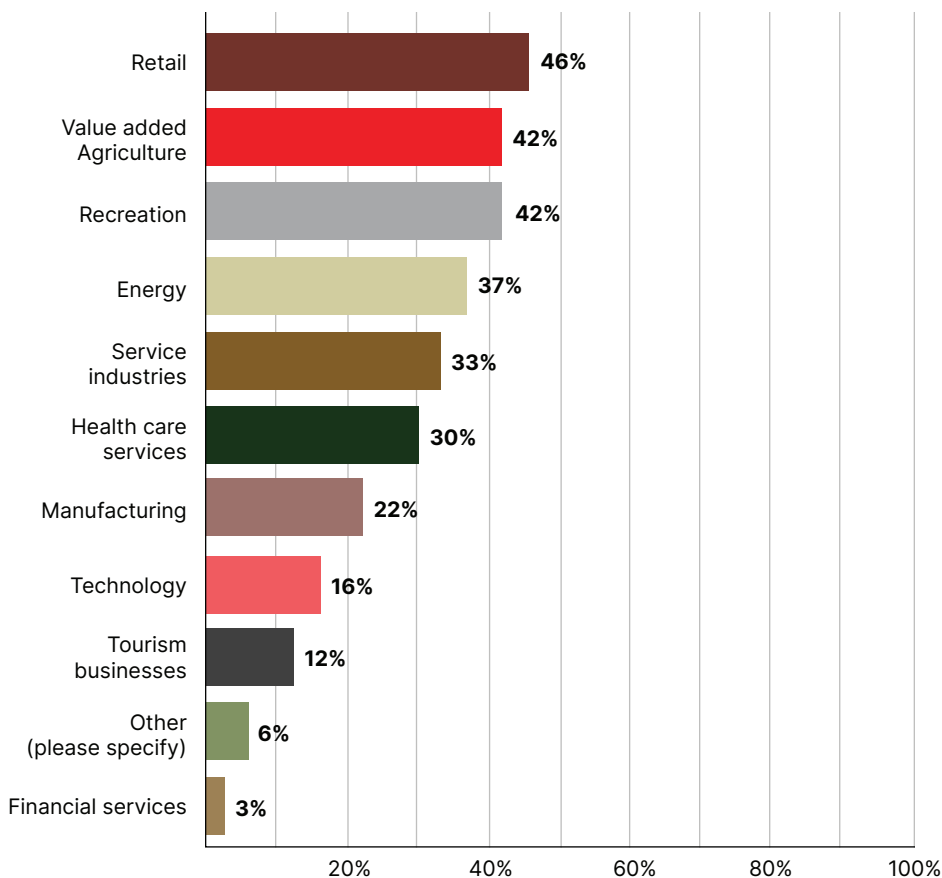
**“businesses** outside of the direct downtown area”



##### WHAT IS VALUE ADDED AGRICULTURE?

“Value-added agriculture opportunities... allow producers to capture more of the value they create.”

Montana Department  
of Agriculture



## QUESTION 5

Based on your top choices from question (#4) above, what **TYPES of business** would you like to see in Richland County? Pick your top 3.

The top three answers were consistent with the previous question, although in a different order.

Respondents would most like to see Entertainment and Activities businesses.

### “OTHER” RESPONSES INCLUDED

#### Retail, including:

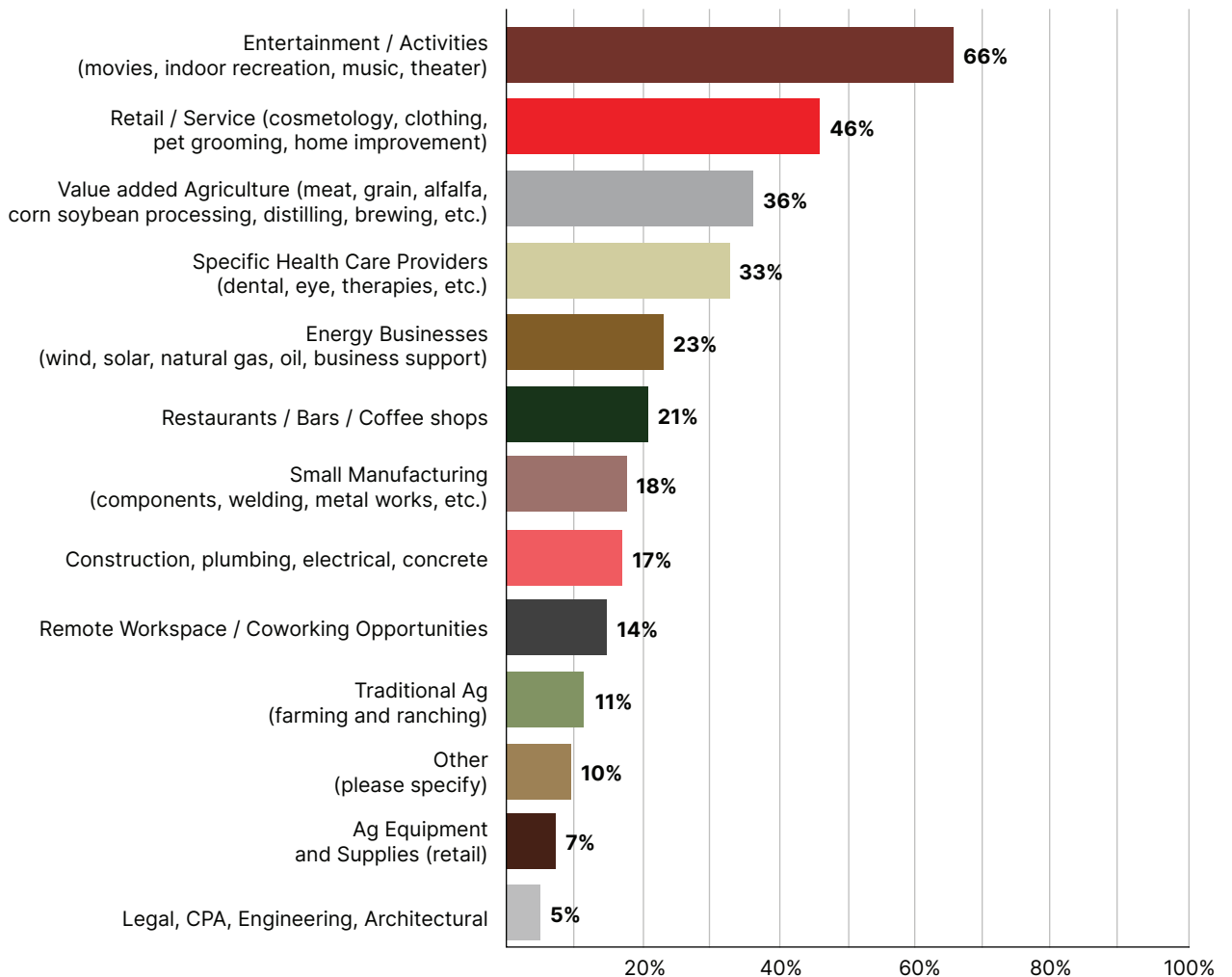
*Affordable Clothing*  
*Big Box or Chain Retailers*  
*Everyday Items/Basics*

#### Recreation, including:

*Pickleball Courts*  
*Indoor Basketball*  
*Rec Center*

“Jobs corps center in partnership with the High School”

“Restaurants with healthier options/ stores with healthy foods”





## QUESTION 6

What do you see as some of the **obstacles for new businesses** to open in Richland County?

### TOP 3 RESPONSES

**Workforce Challenges**

**Population and/or Location**

**Lack of community support**

### "OTHER" RESPONSES INCLUDED

**"Housing/Rental Cost"**

**"Affordable housing** for potential employees"

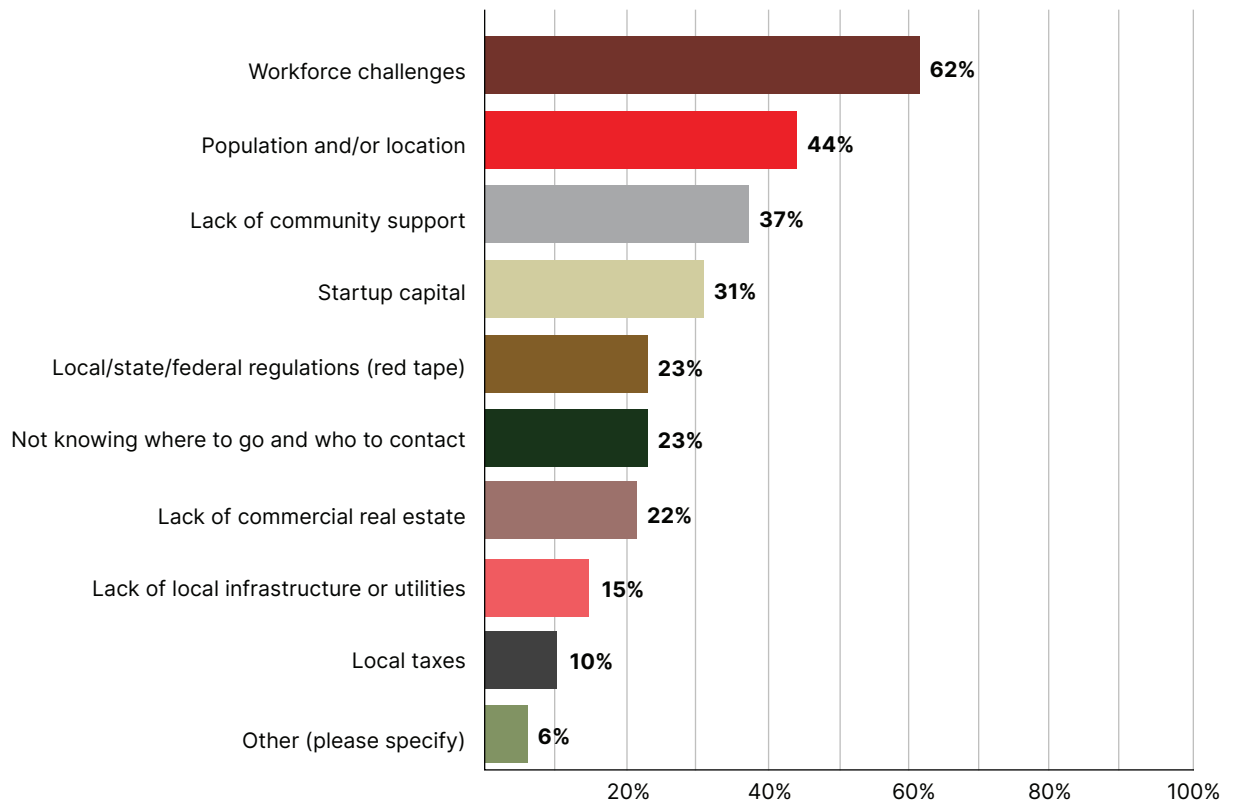
**"Cost of overhead"**

**"Area "cliques" impede growth or obstruct other businesses"**

**"Lack of local governmental support. Lack of state governmental support."**

**"The Montana permitting process is difficult and slow."**

**"...employees want M-TH work schedule like their school kids which makes it difficult for businesses that are open M-Sunday"**



## QUESTION 7

What **changes** would you like to see in Richland County?

THEMES	SELECTED RESPONSES	
<b>Rec Center</b> About 43 responses were specifically asking for a rec center. About 90 responses total mentioned more recreational opportunities of some kind, for people of all ages.	<p>"A <b>community and agencies</b> that work together for a common cause."</p> <p>"A local change in the focus of local government and businesses toward a <b>more diverse economy</b> rather than simply being focused on agriculture and oilfield services."</p> <p>"A full and <b>vibrant downtown!</b>"</p> <p>"More opportunities for <b>youth to stay in their home town.</b>"</p> <p>"<b>More activities for all but mostly children.</b> An indoor recreational center would be amazing!"</p> <p>"Being able to <b>attract young families</b> with more quality in our community infrastructure(parks/recreation beyond our excellent hunting and fishing) because we will grow better with young families."</p> <p>"Broader <b>communications about activities, services, events</b>"</p> <p>"More <b>engagement opportunities for young professionals</b> moving to the area"</p> <p>"An <b>organized Volunteer group</b> ready to help the community when needed."</p> <p>"<b>More arts/music culture.</b> More opportunities for kids in areas other than sports (i.e. arts, music, outdoor activities)."</p> <p>"Provide the <b>resources residents need.</b> If we didn't have to go elsewhere for services,healthcare, shopping, etc. there might be more buy-in to our community, and together we can work towards adding value."</p>	
<b>Retail</b> About 30 responses mentioned retail shopping. Respondents generally wanted local access to basics such as food and clothing. Some expressed interest in chain stores such as Walmart, while some expressed support for more local businesses, but understood challenges with pricing	<p>"I would love to have a community <b>rec center, affordable groceries,</b> and/or more opportunities to buy <b>affordable clothing.</b>"</p> <p>"Another <b>ag processing facility,</b> like Wheat Montana, or some kind of regional food hub. More opportunities for entertainment that doesn't revolve around a bar. Someplace that isn't a dollar store."</p> <p>"Improved <b>shopping for daily items</b> and restaurants. Attractions to draw people in. Us locals ALL need to be more optimistic and welcoming to new possibilities."</p> <p>"More money spent on the <b>overall population of Richland county</b> instead of spending so much money on the fairgrounds for a 4 day event."</p>	
<b>Community</b> About 10 respondents voiced the importance of needing community support for economic progress.	<p>"Tackling the challenge of <b>traditional lifestyle</b> of a small community while <b>still showing progress.</b>"</p> <p>"Can we <b>open the library on the weekends?</b>"</p>	
<b>Commercial Spaces</b> About 9 responses mentioned commercial spaces. Comments included beautifying downtown areas, concerns about high rent, and utilizing existing spaces creatively.	<p>"I would love to see an actual <b>rec center</b> for the kids to be used during all seasons."</p> <p>"<b>A tech services store.</b> Someplace I could take a computer or an iPad to help trouble shoot and get it working again."</p> <p>"More people <b>supporting local stores</b> so we have some. Less on line. With that being said it needs to be affordable so you don't have to go on line"</p>	
<b>We have enough of...</b> Respondents mentioned the area has enough bars and coffee shops, and has invested enough in fairgrounds. Other investment areas are desired.		

## QUESTION 8

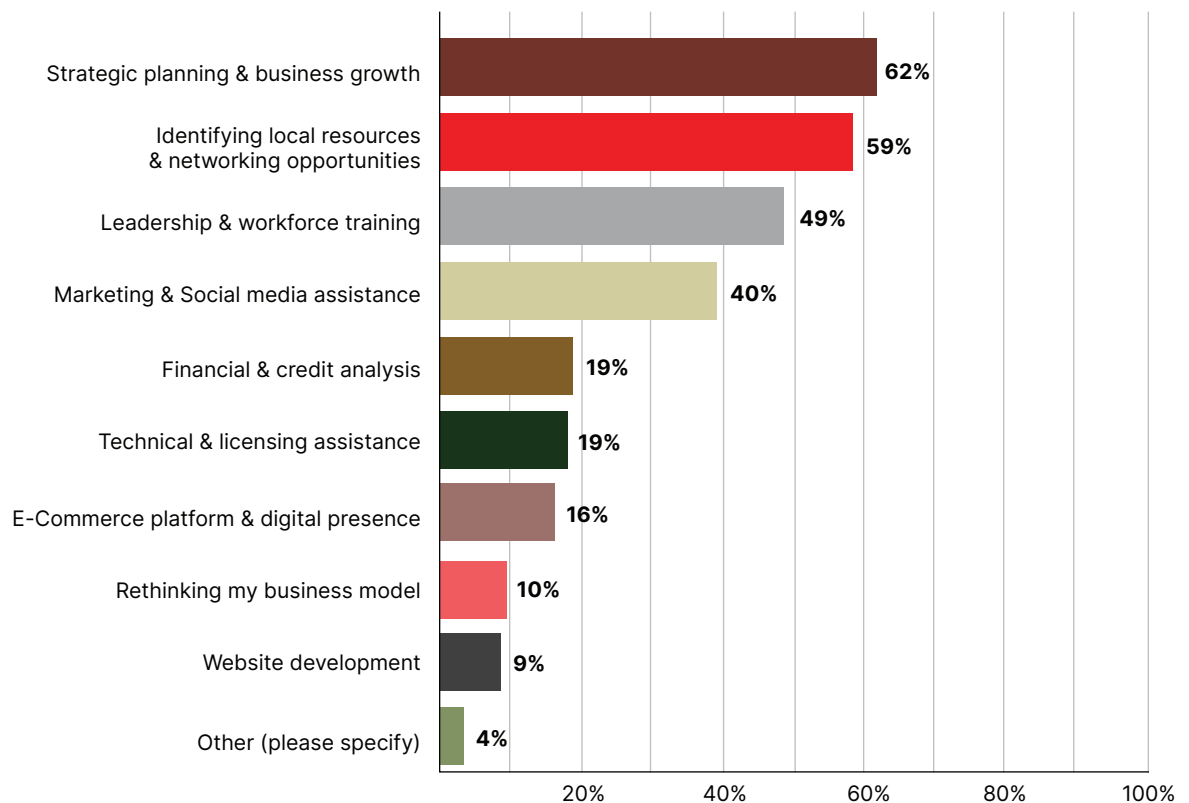
What type of economic **development services** do you believe would help businesses be more successful? Pick your top 3.

**Marketing and Social Media assistance** was ranked higher than other types of digital presence, such as e-commerce and website development.

### “OTHER” RESPONSES INCLUDED

**“Help for getting past the first year.** Too many things open and close too fast without a financial plan.”

**“How and where to find the knowledge regarding the paperwork side of business. Who can help and what do they need? What is a good strategy based on this region’s unique economy.”**



## QUESTION 9

In order to achieve long-term economic stability and increase economic resilience, please rate the importance of the following challenges:

### TOP 3 CHALLENGES RANKED “VERY IMPORTANT” OR “IMPORTANT”

**89%**

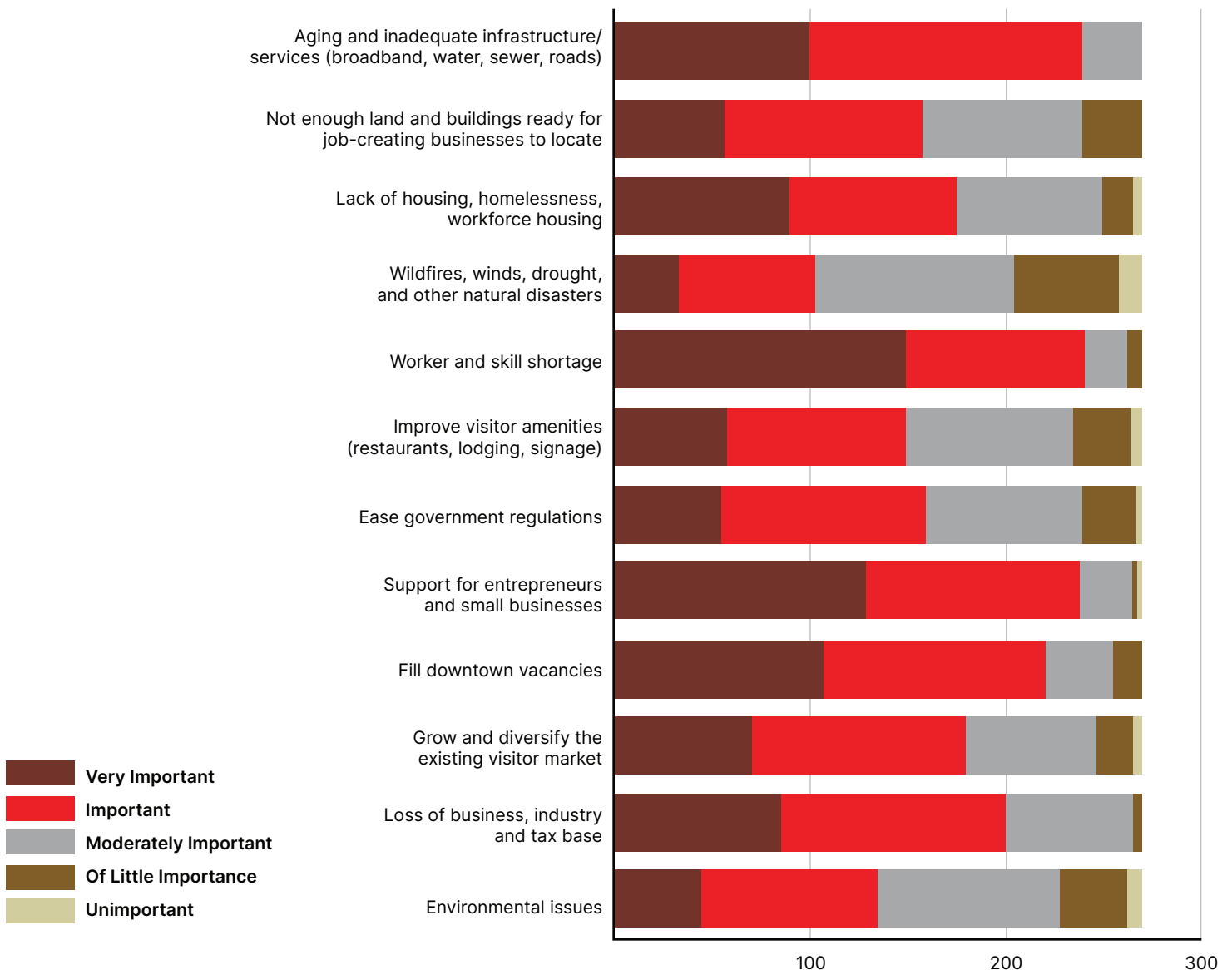
**Worker and skill shortage**

**89%**

**Aging and inadequate infrastructure/services**

**89%**

**Support for entrepreneurs and small businesses**



## QUESTION 10

Please provide any additional comments regarding growth/development in Richland County/your community.

### SELECTED RESPONSES

**"The county needs a recreational center!"** Being active and healthy is not going to go out of style. We are long, long over due. In the years I've lived here I've completed too many surveys....build and they will come."

**"New businesses** are struggling and need additional guidance before opening doors"

"Continued work to educate and reinforce the need to **transition businesses**, specifically agriculture operations to the next generation."

"Change is inevitable in a community. **Community resilience** needs to be supported with solid bases of infrastructure, economic development, supporting families/youth, housing and job opportunities. All of this leads to a better quality of life for people wanting to move and live here."

**"A community center with an indoor pool** would benefit everyone. Curbs and sidewalks need redone. Most are not accessible via wheelchair"

"We need any type of **AG processing plants** to utilize our irrigation farming to high value profitable crops. The loss of Sidney Sugars has extremely hurt our farming community."

"It seems there's an ever present cycle of small businesses, failing due to lack of community support, but this community can't support because **local businesses have to charge so much to be profitable**. Wish there was a way to balance that out."

**"Workforce challenges** are impacting growth and sustainability"

**"Housing and shopping** are comments/concerns that come up when people are considering a move to our community for a job opportunity. Typically, they want to know where the nearest super store is... such as WalMart."

"Just **more things for everyone to do. More affordable housing** and more housing options."

**"A recreational center is necessary.** It would bring jobs, growth, and boost tourism. A boon for the community."

**"Attracting younger community members** will be important for the future growth of the community. Additionally community participation and involvement from a larger sector of the community is also important."

**"Update the downtown** area!"

"I appreciate the Chambers recent movement to **plan and grow local events.**"

**"Thank you** to REDC for the survey. I believe this survey, getting feedback from the community, is a great step in the right direction!"

"We need to find a way to **bring in people to fill out the shortage in workers** in every single industry in our communities. Skilled and unskilled."

"Be more **welcoming and inviting** to outsiders trying to come in."

**"We really need a rec center!"**

Jobs! Keep youth out of trouble. Income from surrounding areas would pour in as people spend dollars everywhere else when they come to the rec center. Our youth would be more competitive in sports year-round. Senior citizens would also utilize this. Keep people home from Williston and Watford. High school kids would be great employees here too. Work study? Opportunities for all."

"I believe that our community would benefit having a **rec center** of some sort for the children in our community. It would benefit all ages from the kiddos going to play or hang out to adults working there or even older kids. We have nothing to really enjoy in our community right now during the winter (which is over half the year in our area)."

"The existing local companies are not highly projected at job service, it is word of mouth. In order to **increase employment**, all avenues such as social media, local job fairs, and a "social worker" type position needs to be in place. To sustain small businesses, we need employees, and it needs to be "blasted" when a position needs to be filled, not JUST job service or JUST Facebook."

"We in Fairview has seen most of Richland county money go to sidney..need to **bring it to more of outlining communities**"

**"More affordable housing** and more restaurants."