



San Juan County Economic Development

Prepared by Dave Conine, Community Development Coordinator, UDB
December, 2018

San Juan County has several significant barriers holding back the development of a thriving, more stable economy. Geographic isolation has long been an impediment to economic growth. The high rate of poverty establishes a cycle that affects the long-term social and economic health of all the County residents. Another barrier to the County's economic health is a result of state and local policy surrounding public lands. The emphasis placed on the resource extractive industries (oil, gas & mining) subjects the region to excessive boom and bust cycles along with absentee control of employment. Local elected officials seem to believe that the San Juan County's most important economic sectors are agriculture and resource extractive industries (these sectors are actually about 8% of local economic activity).

The opposition to the Bears Ears National Monument was an emotional response that failed to recognize important emerging local and global economic opportunities. The same economic mythology resulted in a down sizing of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument nearly twenty-two years after it was established. In spite of the robust economic growth driven by the Grand Staircase Monument, state and local officials persisted in claims that the Monument has devastated the local economy. Bears Ears and Grand Staircase both represent important opportunities for establishing locally owned businesses that import dollars to the local economies.

Rural counties across America have suffered economic decline as job opportunities are increasingly in technology sectors that cluster in urban areas. Rural young people migrate to the better economic prospects offered in cities. Additionally, global market forces have reduced employment in many of the traditionally rural economic sectors.

What Economic Opportunities are Viable Options for San Juan County?

San Juan County leaders need to carefully and objectively evaluate the economic strengths and barriers for the future. Currently the access to reliable broadband service is a very real barrier to economic growth and job creation. Improving broadband coverage will make it possible to establish a tribally owned cooperative electrical utility service that can deliver solar electrical service to homes that do not currently have electric power available. The utility would also be an employer adding essential jobs.

Additionally, many businesses can now locate anywhere they choose as long as there is access to reliable broadband. The Governor's Office of Economic Development is working to get information technology businesses on the Wasatch Front to create remote jobsites in rural areas that allow people to work online from home or local offices. This may help reduce the outmigration of young people.

One barrier to economic development in rural places like San Juan County is the belief that the investment capital necessary to create a business is not available outside the urban areas. However, there are loans and grants available that specifically target rural and tribal communities. UDB has expertise on these resources and is very willing to provide technical assistance to assist farmers and business owners with access to capital.



Native Arts

The Native community of San Juan County includes an amazing talent pool of artists who could benefit from better venues for exhibits and improved access to potential customers. UDB is exploring options for establishing an arts and cultural event space with galleries, classrooms and large space for gatherings.

Improving the connection between Native artisans and potential customers could begin with a printed and online directory with pictures of the artist's work along with the artist's statement about his or her work. The arts directory could be distributed through local hotels, restaurants and visitor centers. The production of this publication could begin at a modest cost and gradually phased into a student internship opportunity that could provide training and income for young people.

Traditional Foodways & Reintroduction of the Native Potato

Restoring traditional foods and agriculture is an important emerging economic activity. UDB has applied for grants to help advance the restoration of traditional foods and food production. As the potato reintroduction moves forward UDB will assist farmers and related business startup with access to USDA grants and loans to help establish this important historic and new opportunity.

The Emerging Visitor Based Economy

The Bears Ears National Monument promised economic growth surrounding the Monument. The Monument related tourism would create business opportunity for local entrepreneurs. In spite of Trump's action on Bears Ears, there has been an upsurge in tourism to San Juan County.

The protection of the Monument area must go forward regardless of ill-advised federal policy. Tourism is more than low wage jobs, **it is a catalyst for economic diversification** and one of our important tasks is to help leaders understand the economic benefits that accrue to tourist destinations that reach far beyond catering to visitors.

Entrepreneurial Training

UDB has completed an initial Entrepreneurial Training program for Native business startups and business owners. Most of the businesses are tied directly to Native arts and crafts. The training suggests we have more to do to help Native artisans access venues for their work and improve marketing opportunity.

Access to Capital

Perhaps the single-most significant barrier to entrepreneurship and business expansion in San Juan County is the perceived shortage of capital. In addition to the difficulty of securing investment capital for business is the related shortage of funding for community infrastructure like water, wastewater and other public facilities. The shortage of affordable housing is also a major barrier to economic development throughout rural Utah. These are all issues UDB can help resolve for San Juan County. The UDB Economic Development Director is available to meet with Chapter Houses and other agencies organizations.