



COLUMBIA GORGE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Hood River, Klickitat, Sherman,
Skamania, and Wasco Counties

SUMMARY Find the full plan at [MCEDD.org](https://www.mcedd.org)

2022-2027

INTRODUCTION



Saul Reynoso

Every five years the region develops the comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS) as a guide to understanding the regional economy and crafting goals, strategies and actions to create jobs, raise income levels, diversify the economy, and improve the quality of life.

Economic development planning as implemented through the CEDS successfully serves as a means to engage community leaders, leverage the involvement of the private sector, and establish a strategic blueprint for regional collaboration.

The plan is compiled by Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) and follows the guidelines required by the US Economic Development Administration (EDA). The strategy was developed over seven monthly meetings in 2021 with more than 100 participants throughout the series, including local and tribal governments, regional partners, ports, chambers, legislators, state and federal partners, businesses and individuals.

The strategy also incorporates additional feedback from online surveys and focus groups held with our Latino/a/Hispanic and Native American communities. Throughout this process we explored the themes of **resilience and fair outcomes** (see sidebar).

What is Resilience?

The Economic Development Administration (EDA) defines resilience as “the ability to recover quickly from a shock, the ability to withstand a shock, and the ability to avoid the shock altogether. Establishing economic resilience in a local or regional economy requires the ability to anticipate risk, evaluate how that risk can impact key economic assets, and build a responsive capacity.”

For the Columbia Gorge, that means working with partners to develop an economy where businesses and communities are prepared for and have the resources to anticipate, plan for and respond to economic shocks, such as natural disasters, disease outbreaks, or man-made disruptions.

What are Fair Outcomes?

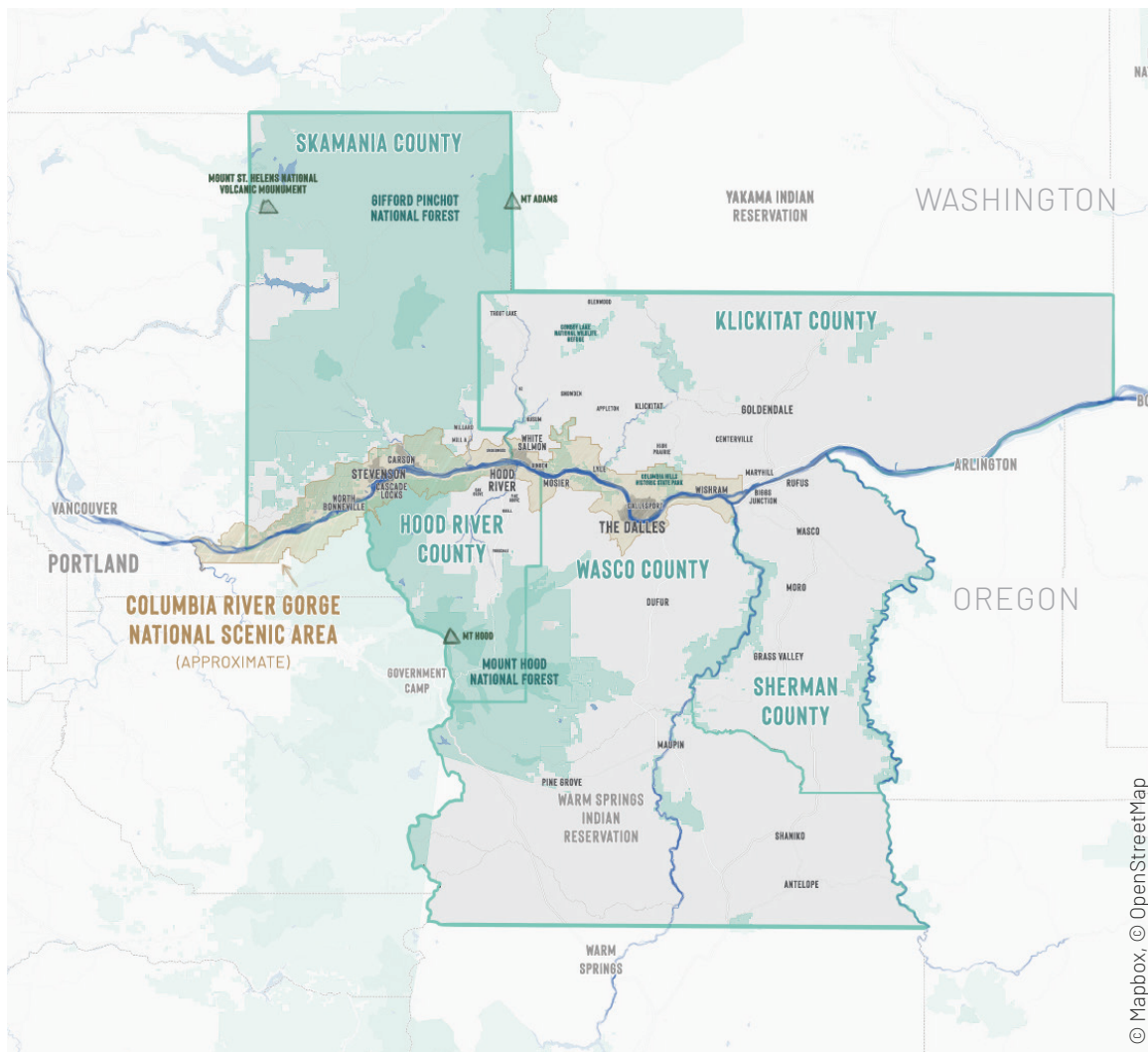
The intention in considering fair outcomes through this CEDS update is in recognition that not everyone in the region has access to the benefits of a strong regional economy. The CEDS update is an opportunity for MCEDD and regional partners to consider where there are gaps in economic opportunity, barriers to accessing this benefit that may vary by population or community, and ways to support improving outcomes.

Five counties in two states sharing a common workforce, geography, and economic development challenges and opportunities.

This document is only a summary of the strategy for 2022-2027. The full strategy, which also includes data/ demographic analysis, action plans, evaluation metrics and appendices, can be found online at www.mcedd.org.

GEOGRAPHY

MCEDD's region includes five counties bordering the Columbia River Gorge in Oregon and Washington. The region partially encompasses the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The region is largely rural, although its proximity to the Portland Metro area and abundance of recreational opportunities brings thousands of tourists to the region every year. In total, the area spans 7,289 square miles.



COVID-19 IMPACTS

This strategy was developed as the COVID-19 pandemic continued, necessitating all process meetings be virtual and shifting the picture of our economy.

In early 2021, MCEDD conducted a COVID-19 Economic Needs Assessment to determine local needs and priorities, understand the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, and identify opportunities for future collaboration around these issues. Through interviews, community meetings, and survey responses MCEDD identified several priority goals for recovery, as well as strategies to address them (see sidebar).

RECOVERY PRIORITIES FROM THE COLUMBIA GORGE COVID-19 ECONOMIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT



Small Business Support: Targeted support for small businesses as they recover and grow, with a focus on those most impacted.



Expanded Broadband Capacity: Expand broadband capacity throughout the region to meet the needs of rural residents who lack access to high-speed internet.



Attainable Housing: Work with partners to develop strategies that address housing availability and affordability for the local workforce.



Improved Transportation Networks: Build on the robust Gorge Transit Strategy to improve transportation options and increase access for rural residents.



Accessible Childcare: Work with community partners to address local gaps in childcare and create affordable options that support middle-to-low-income earners.



Workforce Development: Engage partners in industry, workforce development groups, and higher education to develop training programs that build skills for higher wage jobs.



Regional Resilience Planning: Leverage the robust response to the pandemic to build resiliency planning networks to prepare businesses, organizations, and residents for future economic shocks and disruptions.

SWOT ANALYSIS & ASSET MAPPING

In no particular order

Strengths / Assets

Scenic Beauty, Recreation, Brand and Tourism Industry
Central Location
Regional Collaboration
Infrastructure
Natural Resources
Human Capital & Entrepreneurial Spirit
Diverse and Growing Industry Sectors
Culture
Availability of Transportation Systems/ Modes

Weaknesses

Regulatory Environment
Disparities Between States
Insufficient and Expensive Housing Stock for Rent and Purchase
Transportation
Infrastructure
Education and Skilled Workforce
Lack of Business Expansion Space
Preparedness
High Poverty Rate/ Economic Disparity

Opportunities

Adjusting Tourism, Expanding Arts and Culture
Connectivity
Synergy Across State Lines
Public Transportation
Leverage Natural Assets
Workforce Development
Growth of Value-Added Ag and Ag Tech Businesses
Quality of Life
Business/ Talent Attraction

Threats

Impacts of Continued Population Growth
Regulations
Housing Shortage Impacts
Infrastructure Limitations
Industry Diversification
Hazards/ Changing Weather/ Resilience
Education and Workforce
Water Access and Regulations
Decision Making

REGIONAL VISION & GOALS



VISION

A bi-state Mid-Columbia region with a resilient, thriving, sustainable, rural economy that supports equal access to diverse business opportunities that act in harmony with the area's unique qualities, values, cultural and natural resources.



Strong Businesses

GOAL STATEMENT

Enhance business innovation, retention and expansion, and entrepreneurship through equal access to support services and capital, diversifying our industry mix, and enhanced coordination to address barriers to growth and sustainability.

OVERVIEW

Mid-Columbia region has weathered the last several recessions better than the two states as a result of the diversity of businesses in the region. By working to strengthen several diverse industry sectors, our region improves its resiliency towards economic shocks. The future of businesses in the region will only be stronger if we build on our abilities to supporting the development of new businesses through entrepreneurship programs, encourage research and development, foster the growth of existing businesses, focus supports on minority- and women-owned businesses, and continue to diversify our industry sectors. Our key industry sectors include:

Natural Resources and Value-Added Agriculture:

Crop production (cherries, pears, apples, wheat, and grapes) and processing continues to be one of our largest employers and an essential base industry, although wages are generally low. Forest/ wood products, another key base industry, has seen job declines but there is potential for growth from new products and utilization of byproducts. Innovation through value-added products can drive job growth in higher wage areas and bring more value to the region's key agricultural and forest products.

Manufacturing / Beverage Manufacturing:

Manufacturing growth in the region is very strong, especially in beverage manufacturing, and provides higher-wage job opportunities. Supporting business expansion and entrepreneurship is important to this sector.

Tech: Unmanned Systems: The sector includes a focus on unmanned systems as the region is a national leading Unmanned Systems hub driven by a local industry heavy-weight and deep breadth in the local supply chain. The industry is a major job producer with a high average wage and is also the source of much of the innovation in the region. Supporting diversification and continued adaptation in this sector is key.

Healthcare: The region has invested heavily in healthcare from our major hospitals to a number of independent practitioners. Healthcare services remains a top employer throughout the region and represents a diversity of jobs types, including many with high wages. Supporting recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and growth as our population ages is crucial to the regional economy.

Utilities and Renewable Energy: The region is already an important center for utilities and renewable energy production by virtue of the hydropower facilities along the Columbia River, extensive investment into wind development and employment within our utilities. Our natural potential to participate in a broader range of renewables make our region a center for energy generation. Greater development in this sector also improves our regional resilience.

Art/Culture/Tourism/Recreation: Tourism is a primary industry sector by virtue of the number of jobs it provides and growth in the sector, but it does not meet wage goals. This sector encompasses initiatives to invest in the quality of tourism sites and visitor infrastructure, spread visitors around the region, and increase resiliency.



Strong Businesses Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Coordinate marketing efforts to increase awareness of existing business resources, including spaces, lending, technical assistance, and others.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Develop and enhance access to business space.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Further develop and advocate for a local Business Support Network with accessible opportunities for businesses to develop skills and access resources, particularly around innovation and retention, in English and Spanish.
- ✓ Strategy 4: Identify and address barriers and opportunities at the industry-sector level to support industry cluster development with specific focus on target industries listed in the plan.
- ✓ Strategy 5: Attract new businesses.
- ✓ Strategy 6: Increase locally available access to capital for entrepreneurs.
- ✓ Strategy 7: Increase the ease of navigating the financial system.
- ✓ Strategy 8: Increase opportunities for businesses to export products



Robust Workforce

GOAL STATEMENT

Cultivate a talented, multicultural workforce through diverse, family-wage career training aligned with industry needs while providing essential infrastructure supports for workforce participation in each community.

OVERVIEW

The region recognizes the critical role of a qualified workforce in addressing sustained economic growth of the region. In educational attainment, the MCEDD region is keeping pace in the percentage of the population with an Associate's degree, but falls behind in measurements of individuals with a bachelor's degree or higher. The primary avenue to address the need for a skilled workforce is through support to enhance and expand upon existing services, with a long-term vision for developing new resources. Needs include:

Childcare: The lack of childcare access and its importance to robust workforce participation became particularly apparent during COVID-19. Developing more capacity in this area and affordable options is crucial to continued economic growth.

Pre-K to Grade 12: The pre-K-12 system in the region is the primary provider for basic skills development. Strong math and literacy skills developed at an early age can set the trajectory for lifelong success.

Basic Skills Training: Basic skill requirements and the workforce quality for entry level positions needs improvement. With a constantly evolving economy, talent in the region must be able to rapidly adjust to new occupations using transferable skills sets. The region seeks to match the needs of businesses with available skills trainings, and to provide training that focuses on our minority communities.

Higher Education: Local community colleges are responsive to industry's needs with cornerstone programs which have supported the region's economic development initiatives. These programs will continue to play a vital role in workforce adaptation.

Quality Workplaces: With a very low regional unemployment rate, the tight labor market is creating competition for qualified workers. Thus, quality of the workplace becomes paramount for employers to retain and provide growth opportunities for skilled workers.

Bi-State Workforce: As a bi-state area, we share a common workforce and require collective training opportunities and a regional system in Oregon and Washington.



Robust Workforce Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Enhance workforce tools to support area employers.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Enhance training opportunities to connect residents with local job opportunities.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Provide career training and services that specifically address bilingual and indigenous workforce needs.
- ✓ Strategy 4: Address childcare needs of employers and workers.
- ✓ Strategy 5: Support strong pre-K to 12 programs throughout the region.
- ✓ Strategy 6: Improve incumbent worker skills; support retooling and upgrading skills.



Resilient Infrastructure

GOAL STATEMENT

Ensure communities and businesses of the Gorge have reliable, resilient access to infrastructure, including attainable housing, high-capacity broadband, sustainable sources of energy, and emergency services, among others, to support future population demands and economic opportunities.

OVERVIEW

Infrastructure, including attainable housing, high-capacity broadband, sustainable sources of energy, and emergency services, among others, is critical to meeting our current needs and supporting future growth driven by our expanding regional economy. Some of these systems have reached or exceeded capacity, while others are facing compliance issues that challenge their operations. Some systems have seen significant investment by local communities to plan for the future. Each of these key infrastructure areas will require innovative approaches to dealing with capacity and resource constraints to build on assets. Below are strategies focusing on each of the key infrastructure areas that incorporate the following principles:

Seek to better understand existing conditions:

Understanding key infrastructure needs, gaps in availability, examples of strategies that have made systems stronger, and barriers to moving projects forward is critical to providing the infrastructure foundation needed to support the region moving forward.

Plan for and facilitate investment in key infrastructure projects:

The successful development of key infrastructure projects supports the regional economy, increases community resilience, and provides opportunities to prepare for the future.

Support project readiness: To meet infrastructure needs in the region, communities will need to match their own resources with outside investment through state and federal programs as well as private funding resources. To achieve this, communities must have the capacity to move from feasibility through planning to increase access to these resources.

There are five Action Plans within Resilient Infrastructure:



Water/Wastewater



Housing



Broadband



Energy



Transportation

Water/ Wastewater Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Plan for and facilitate investment in water and wastewater projects that enhance the Gorge community, economy, resiliency, and address growing demand.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Support innovative products and practices in the region to foster continued access to water resources as snow melt and precipitation reduces.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Increase access to state and federal resources to support infrastructure development

Housing Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Increase awareness and understanding of housing market conditions in the Gorge.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Develop innovative strategies to support increasing attainable housing production in the Gorge.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Enhance communication and coordination across the region to support housing development.

Broadband Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Support addressing middle and last mile telecommunications infrastructure gaps.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Support investments into a fully redundant network.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Advocate for and pursue funding through federal and state funding programs.
- ✓ Strategy 4: Increase adoption and use of existing broadband infrastructure.

Energy Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Leverage state requirements for 100% renewable energy generation to support investment in our region and increase resiliency of our local energy system.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Support investments that keep critical facilities and communities powered during disruptive events.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Encourage investment in energy conservation for homes and businesses to reduce costs, reduce grid constraints, and increase regional competitiveness.
- ✓ Strategy 4: Support the needs of the Native American community to connect the in-lieu sites to electricity and/or supplies of propane for heat.

Transportation Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Coordinate transportation priorities and investments and align planning efforts among regional partners to support the Mid-Columbia's economies and communities.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Support enhancements to regional air, water and rail infrastructure for cargo and passenger transport (locals and visitors).
- ✓ Strategy 3: Improve safety for all users of regional and local transportation networks.
- ✓ Strategy 4: Increase capacity of regional transportation network with efficient and accessible bi-state transit options.
- ✓ Strategy 5: Increase **fair** access to transit options among underserved populations, including to Native American in-lieu sites.
- ✓ Strategy 6: Provide safe and complete facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians.
- ✓ Strategy 7: Invest in resiliency for the region to mitigate, adapt and plan for extreme weather, natural and human-caused disasters.



Powerful Regional Collaboration

GOAL STATEMENT

Effectively collaborate and advocate as a bi-state region to leverage the economic assets of the Columbia River Gorge to reach our goals for strong businesses, a robust workforce, and resilient infrastructure.

OVERVIEW

A culture of collaboration and strong existing networks were identified as regional strengths in the SWOT analysis. This goal presents opportunities to build on those strengths to help the region meet the three prior goals noted in the CEDS: **strong businesses, a robust workforce, and resilient infrastructure**. Working together as partners to advocate for the region will increase our success, allow us to reach higher, and bring additional resources into our communities to support addressing key challenges and leveraging opportunities.

Powerful Regional Collaboration Action Strategies

- ✓ Strategy 1: Strengthen information gathering and sharing to advocate for community projects and policy issues.
- ✓ Strategy 2: Build on existing collaborative groups.
- ✓ Strategy 3: Increase capacity for a regional advocacy role.



Columbia Gorge Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

2026 Priority Projects

Washington Counties

1. Port of Skamania: Cascades Business Park
2. Port of Klickitat: Dallesport Industrial Park Terminal 1
3. Skamania County: Bridge Replacements
4. Cities of Bingen and White Salmon: Publicly Owned Treatment Works Plant Improvements
5. City of Stevenson: Rock Creek Intake
6. Port of Klickitat: Bingen Point Industrial Park Development
7. Skamania County: Fairgrounds Building Upgrade
8. City of Bingen: Water Main Extension Down SR-14
9. Skamania County: Courthouse Efficiency Upgrades
10. City of Goldendale: Municipal Airport Improvements

Oregon Counties

1. Hood River-White Salmon Bridge Authority, Port of Cascade Locks: Interstate Bridges: Hood River-White Salmon Bridge Replacement, Bridge of the Gods Pedestrian Safety, Preservation, and Seismic Resilience Project
2. Significant Sewer Projects in Sherman County Cities: Wasco, Grass Valley, Moro
3. Significant Water Projects Across Wasco County: Maupin, The Dalles, Pine Grove Water District, Tooley Water District, Wamic Water and Sanitary Authority
4. Port of Hood River: Terminal Building Ken Jernstedt Airfield
5. City of The Dalles: 6th Street Bridge Replacement
6. Gilliam County, Qlife : Broadband Improvements
7. City of Hood River: Hood River Elevated Sewer Line
8. Significant Water Improvements in Sherman County Cities: Moro, Rufus, Grass Valley, Wasco
9. Hood River County: County Courthouse, Public Safety and Administration Building Replacement
10. City of Condon: Condon Water Projects
11. Sherman Health District: Medical Clinic Facility Expansion and Backup Power/Emergency Generator

View the full strategy, which also includes data/demographic analysis, action plans, evaluation metrics and appendices online at www.mcedd.org.



Mid-Columbia Economic Development District
802 Chenoweth Loop Road, The Dalles, OR 97058
MCEDD.org