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## **Building a Prosperous Rio Blanco County**

### Article IV: Tourism

Tourism is the third leg of the economic development stool. Business attraction, business retention, and tourism attraction must all work together in order to achieve the most impactful economic development results. Attracting visitors to our community will directly drive retail, restaurant, lodging and guiding or tour-type business.

We are working hard to make Rio Blanco County a great destination for tourists, specifically outdoor enthusiasts. We must create activities that build a market for visitors. The Building a Prosperous Rio Blanco County Plan identifies three key strategies for attracting visitors.

1. The Center of Outdoor Adventure in Meeker—The Center is positioned to be a main attraction for tourists and residents alike, and will create a premier destination for ATV/OHV riding, fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, backpacking, horseback riding and wildlife watching enthusiasts. Additional people in town will create foot traffic and invigorate downtown redevelopment efforts, as well as energize the Main Street movement being led by the Meeker Chamber of Commerce.
2. Development of outdoor recreational offerings in Rangely – Rangely has terrific outdoor recreational assets that offer potential for being a large attraction. Making these assets “visitor ready” is a strategy that will provide tourism offerings and new business opportunities to service increased tourism traffic.
3. Activities that compliment business—Building a larger outdoor tourist market will attract complementary business. Current strategies identify manufacturers of outdoor gear and the shooting sports industry as a feasible opportunity for business in Rio Blanco County. This creates synergy with existing manufacturers and would create jobs that would attract outdoor fans to supply the workforce.

There is critical preparation work that must be done in order to target and attract guests. The Plan calls for conducting research for a Community Branding and Marketing Plan. This study is currently underway and is funded through the Eastern and Western Rio Blanco County Lodging Tax Boards and Rio Blanco County. The required outcomes will produce a marketing and action plan, a community logo, and identify key markets to target outdoor aficionados.

Outreach efforts include highlighting the many assets of our communities in order to attract visitors. Marketing materials will showcase cultural centers, regional creative clusters, Flat Tops Wilderness and White River Forest, motorized recreation options and other adventure tourism assets.

The heritage and cultural aspect will help create the unique experience tourists are looking for and will distinguish Rio Blanco County from other destinations. For example, using art in public places to illustrate our rich history will add to the visitor's experience. Equally valuable will be growing the creative cluster. Art, pottery, textiles and products that are distinct to our region will add to the experience and provide visitors with the true flavor of Rio Blanco County. Through the Main Street Program, historical preservation, window displays and other interesting aspects of our community will be showcased.

There is interest and movement towards these endeavors. In December, Rio Blanco County will be hosting representatives from the Adventure Trade Association to help identify strategic action plans for tourism in Meeker and Rangely. Rio Blanco County will be represented at national and international trade shows, which are great venues to build Rio Blanco County's identity and "put our name out there." Tradeshows are also a great tool to specifically target business operators to our communities. It is important to note that Rio Blanco County has received several letters of support from pivotal organizations, such as the National Field Archery Association who is interested in hosting tournaments and competitions, backpacking touring companies, and guided tour operators for the quickly growing wildlife watching tourism sector, to mention a few. Attracting tourists can be a real boost to our economy. With the right attractions and activities, we can use tourism dollars to bolster many aspects of our community.

Next week's article will focus on the role of government in economic development and how these strategies can be funded. Mark your calendar for a community meeting to explain the Building a Prosperous Rio Blanco Plan, on November 2, 2016 at 6:00p.m. at Mountain Valley Bank. If you have any questions they can be directed to Katelin Cook, Economic Development Coordinator for Rio Blanco County by phone at (970) 878-9474.