



Economic Development Report

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THE ECONOMIC BASE OF LA PLATA COUNTY, COLORADO: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- *La Plata County is a primarily rural county that is economically dependent on its natural resource base.*
- *Extractive industries (e.g., coal) were traditionally and remain important.*
- *Extant environmental quality has become increasingly important (tourism, second home development).*
- *Clean industry (e.g., education, health care) presents a clear regional development strategy*

Introduction

This report is intended to outline the economic conditions in La Plata County, Colorado in a manner that will be useful for economic development planning. Data from a variety of governmental and nongovernmental records, gathered primarily via the Internet, were used to create this report. The report is intended to be broad in scope and focuses on a wide range of topics in La Plata County that include land use, population, employment, personal income, and three important industries that shape La Plata County: tourism, mining and agriculture. The report aims not only to

present data, but also to show how the economic sectors of La Plata County are interconnected. Figures, charts, and time series are provided to present data in a visual and accessible manner.

Summary

La Plata County is considerably economically developed compared to its Region 9 neighbors. La Plata County has enjoyed low and stable unemployment over the years, boasts an abundance of natural gas and is the region's only producer of coal. La Plata County has the Region's only four-year university, Ft. Lewis College, and has a more educated population than the state of Colorado and the nation as a whole. It is the only county in the region to have over 10,000 workers and that hosts companies with over 500 employees. La Plata County is a transportation hub of the region with a commercial airport, a general aviation airport and its county seat, Durango, located at the intersection of highways 160 and 550.

La Plata County is a primarily rural county that is economically dependent on its natural resource base. Mining has traditionally been the cornerstone of the county's economy, and continues to be a top industry today, largely because of the enormous supply of natural gas that lies beneath the surface of the county. La Plata County is the leading producer of natural gas in

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Colorado and is the sixth greatest natural gas producing county nationwide.

Tourism, however, is now the leading industry in La Plata County. Tourism is a very labor-intensive industry, and more than one-fourth of all employment in La Plata County is in the tourism industry. Tourism industry jobs are mostly found in the service, trade and lodging sectors; although the economic impacts of tourism reach far beyond. The natural beauty of La Plata County has also created a wave of amenity migration, which has boosted the construction and real estate sectors. Tourism appears to be an industry that will experience considerable growth in the future.

Although agriculture is not a great source of income in La Plata County, agricultural land makes up over half of the county. What happens to this land in the future will influence the shape of the economy. The current trend is towards more numerous, smaller farms and ranches that are not profitable. While the division of farmland is changing, the amount of farmland in La Plata County has remained stable.

The data presented in this report can help residents and decision makers in La Plata County better understand the economic base of the region in which they live and the economic direction in which the county is headed. However, policy will not fall directly out of the facts presented in this report. The data must be combined with local knowledge to make effective policy decisions and reach county objectives to help lead to the long-term economic and social development of La Plata County.

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