

Collaborative Pathways to Economic Resilience in Clear Creek County

William Wilkins, William Shuster, Lindsey Valdez, Flo Raitano, Ang Lee, Lynnea Doty, Maddy Kimber, Matt Smith, Alison Sherwood

REDI Report – April 2025

<https://csuredi.org/>

- Clear Creek County experienced a 47.3% decline in property tax revenue from 2013 to 2022, driven by falling assessed values in the natural resource extraction industry.
- A phased, multi-tiered economic diversification strategy is underway, supported by regional partners and designed to generate sustainable revenue.
- The county is applying an economic resilience framework to guide short- and long-term initiatives that leverage local strengths and address structural challenges.

Introduction

Clear Creek County, Colorado, located 20 miles west of Denver in the Rocky Mountains, is proactively advancing a multi-tiered economic diversification strategy. The effort is led by the Clear Creek Economic Development Corporation (CCEDC) in partnership with regional stakeholders, the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG), and Colorado State University (CSU). These initiatives aim to reduce economic vulnerability, enhance long-term sustainability, and capitalize on the county’s unique geographic and demographic strengths.

The property tax revenue of Clear Creek County has declined significantly—down 47.3% between 2013 and 2022—due to falling assessed values in the natural resource extraction sector (Wilkins, 2025). The county’s population is approximately 9,358, with a growing median household income of \$90,350 (Consensus Report, 2022). While tourism and sales tax revenues have increased, the county faces structural challenges, including the anticipated closure of a major employer, land-use tensions, and limited developable property. Clear Creek is responding with a comprehensive strategy focused on regional collaboration, structured assessments, and targeted initiatives to build a more resilient and diversified economy.

Opportunities and Challenges

Clear Creek County’s opportunity assessment incorporated multiple strategic tools, including a SWOT analysis, the SOAR model, and Porter’s Diamond framework (Schuster & Wilkins, 2023). These tools identified both internal and external dynamics shaping the county’s economic landscape. Table 1 summarizes common themes across frameworks, highlighting strengths in recreation and workforce, weaknesses related to land availability and business mix, and opportunities in targeted growth sectors. Key barriers include infrastructure limitations, land-use tensions, and the closure of major employers such as the Henderson Mine.

Phased Approach to Economic Diversification

Clear Creek County’s strategy follows a phased approach balancing near-term action with long-term investment.

Phase One emphasizes community-driven initiatives:

- *Change for Change* is a “round-up” donation program administered by the Clear Creek County Foundation. With a projected 45% participation rate, it could generate up to \$400,000 annually for local economic development (Schuster & Wilkins, 2023).

- *Shoulder Season Events* aim to expand tourism during off-peak periods with festivals like “Tommy Knocker Days,” modeled after successful events such as Frozen Dead Guy Days and the Emma Crawford Coffin Races.

Table 1. Summary of Opportunity Assessment Tools for Clear Creek County

Category	Key Themes from SWOT, SOAR, and Porter’s Diamond Models
Strengths	Recreation/tourism assets; strong community identity; engaged leadership; regional collaboration; skilled recreation workforce; proximity to Denver; growing tourism and sales tax revenues; agriculture; quarrying; short-term rentals; education services.
Weaknesses	Budget seasonality; low concentration of non-employer businesses; limited private land; regulatory barriers; resistance to growth in some towns; sales decline in construction and transport.
Opportunities	Growth in healthcare, education, light manufacturing, tech, housing; expanding festivals and events; rental space availability; promotion of remote work; attract investment in professional services; expand recreation-based jobs and housing.
Threats / Barriers	Tax revenue generated from local mineral extraction has decreased annually since 2013; land-use tension; infrastructure constraints; inter-county competition; affordable housing shortages; development opposition; need for broader stakeholder alignment.
Aspirations / Strengths	Year-round tourism; economic diversity; local workforce retention; public-private investment; county-first development models.
Results / Competitive Position	Tommy Knocker Days; Change for Change; regional summit milestones; recreation access (e.g., gondola); unique destinations and branding (e.g., Georgetown Railroad, Mt. Blue Sky, Argo Mine); public funding for resident initiatives.

Phase Two prioritizes infrastructure and diversification:

- The *Argo Gondola Project*, a private venture, will improve access to scenic sites and boost local business traffic.
- A county-led *Parking Garage Development* will ease congestion and support growing visitor demand.

These efforts aim to anchor Clear Creek’s transition toward a more sustainable, year-round economy.

Future Opportunities

Additional projects are under consideration to further diversify the economic base:

- Enhancing *Indian Hot Springs* as a regional wellness destination to boost year-round tourism.
- Establishing a *light manufacturing facility* designed for high-value, low-impact enterprises—those requiring moderate space, minimal water use, and generating little waste.

These proposals reflect an effort to build a more balanced economy that leverages the county’s natural assets while addressing infrastructure and employment gaps.

Continued Leadership Engagement

Strategic planning has been guided by collaborative leadership involving CSU’s College of Business, REDI, CCEDC, and DRCOG. Engagement with local stakeholders—including residents and business owners—has been critical to ensuring buy-in and local insight. Leadership events such as the Regional Resilience Mixer and Leadership Breakfast (February 13–14, 2025) supported collaborative review of the

Economic Resilience Framework (Economic Resilience Framework, 2025–2030). Participants identified critical priorities for economic development and continue to shape the implementation process. This framework will serve as the foundation for future action plans and guide the county’s economic strategy.

Key Priorities Identified

Below is a summary of the priority areas the team identified across the five key themes (Valdez, 2025):

- **Affordability:** Advancing the multi-jurisdictional housing authority, expanding regional transportation options, and supporting innovative housing solutions.
- **Diversification & Economic Growth:** Strengthening small business support, identifying target industries, and developing business incentive programs.
- **Outdoor Recreation & Tourism:** Expanding trail networks, increasing year-round recreation options, and enhancing heritage and wellness tourism opportunities.
- **Equitable Access:** Expanding broadband infrastructure, improving transportation connectivity, and supporting workforce mobility.
- **Quality of Life:** Addressing food deserts, investing in public art and cultural programming, and improving walkability and community amenities.

Data-Driven Decision Making

In 2024, Colorado Mesa University published an economic newsletter tracking local trends in GDP, employment, income, housing, and population (Perry, 2024). This resource has supported informed decision-making among local leaders and residents. To build on this effort, Clear Creek County is collaborating with CSU and REDI to launch an annual economic indicators newsletter in Winter 2025. These initiatives aim to enhance transparency, support data-driven policy, and monitor progress toward economic resilience. Ongoing data collection will also help assess the effectiveness of the county’s strategic initiatives and inform future adjustments.

Conclusion

This report synthesizes findings from stakeholder interviews, regional planning meetings, and collaborative research conducted since Fall 2022 (Economic Resilience Framework, 2025–2030). As Clear Creek County faces fiscal pressure and economic uncertainty, continued collaboration and data-informed strategy will be essential. Through phased implementation, community engagement, and regional partnership, the county is building a more resilient and diversified economy—one that reflects local values and positions the region for long-term sustainability.

References

- Chavez, A. (2022). *REDI report on Clear Creek County*. Colorado State University Regional Economic Development Institute (REDI). <https://csuredi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Clear-Creek-1-Prstn.pdf>
- Economic Resilience Framework. (2025). *Economic Resilience Framework 2025–2030: Region 3 – Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties*. Clear Creek Economic Development Corporation. <https://www.clearcreekedc.org/data-center>
- Perry, N. (2024). *Clear Creek County Economic Newsletter*. Colorado Mesa University. <https://www.clearcreekedc.org/data-center>
- Shuster, W., & Wilkins, W. (2023). *Clear Creek County economic recommendations*. C State Consulting. <https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:c2c41803-ff55-4a15-a553-be7db31c57b5>
- Valdez, L. (2025, March 20). *Region 3 resilience community stakeholder update*. Clear Creek Economic Development Corporation.
- Wilkins, W. (2025). Interview with Clear Creek County Deputy Manager.