KEY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ASSETS

THE ORIGIN STORY

This is a report on assets that may have potential to support an economic development strategy for the CEDS 2025. Additional research will be needed to further investigate the viability and relative strength of these assets.

The original list of assets was created by combing through all sections of the CEDS 2021 and pulling out any language, statements, terms and items mentioned or listed as assets, strengths, and opportunities. These raw data were then organized in thought clusters around recurrent themes. The resulting list was analyzed and edited by NWNMCOG to create a list of top twenty assets, further analyzed and reduced to this list of fourteen assets.

With few exceptions, the annotations in this report were derived from the input provided by the regional EDOs in response to the Update Survey framed around the specific 21 strategies of the CEDS 2021. Many notes from the survey responses will need further investigation that was beyond the scope of this report.

1. AGRICULTURE AND LOCAL FOOD SYSTEMS

Farming

In Cibola County, vibrant farming communities in Grants-Milan, Acoma, Laguna, Ramah, El Morro, and Fence Lake need better integration of eco-systems, could develop farm-to-table dining, eco-tourism, agri-tourism. Farmers in El Morro area need a refrigerated truck to get produce to markets in Cibola and McKinley Counties. The Grants Farmers Market expansion was supported by USDA and local nonprofits to increase access to locally grown food and provide vendor training.

In San Juan County, the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry (NAPI) is a 110,000-acre farm employing 296 people. The *foodagriculturecollaborative.org* is a Navajo and Hopi alliance to foster growth in the food/agriculture economy on the Navajo Nation. Navajo Tech has an award-winning Culinary Arts program. Lock Street Eats is a Food Truck Park in Farmington.

Grants from NM Economic Development Department (EDD) target sustainable and value-added agriculture. Dreaming New Mexico Food and Farming should be investigated as a potential resource.

Climate Change is a downside risk to farming. Higher temperatures result in declining crop yields. Changes in snow cover and water supplies coupled with challenges accessing water threaten agricultural initiatives.

Erosion control, better water management, grazing land management, and climate-smart agriculture can boost productivity, lower emissions, improve soil quality and water efficiency, and increase incomes and climate resilience (Fast Facts, 2024). More information at *unfcc.int/news/climate-smart-agriculture.*

The impact of mass deportations of immigrants may have a negative effect on the availability of farm workers and should be investigated.

Composting

Composting is a strategy to address many of the problems in Cibola and McKinley Counties including environmental pollution, ecosystem contamination, poverty, job insecurity, food deserts and lack of access to healthy food, environmental hazards such as unhealthy land uses, poor air and water quality, and other environmental threats that drive health disparities and result in poor health outcomes.

A large-scale composting project in McKinley and Cibola Counties would benefit the environment, the economy, and the health of the people by addressing the following goals:

- Reduce environmental pollution (greenhouse gas emissions, contaminated land and groundwater);
- Accelerate a circular economy to create jobs and grow the labor force;
- Create healthier communities by contributing to growing healthy food and restoring ecosystems.

Food Hubs

The Northwest New Mexico Food Hub Development initiative is part of a broader effort under the Food, Hunger and Agriculture Program led by the NM EDD to support local reinvestment and value chain development by strengthening regional food systems, particularly in rural and underserved communities.

The *Harvest Food Hub (HFH)* serves the Farmington area. San Juan College is constructing a test kitchen at the Harvest Food Hub. The *Frontier Food Hub (FFH)* in Silver City works with over 45 local farmers and ranchers (suppliers) to distribute food to schools, food pantries, and underserved communities. FY25 infrastructure Expansion included installation of large walk-in cooler, addition of an access ramp, electric pallet jack, powered pallet stacker, and refrigerated box truck. FFH may supply GMCS schools and a McKinley senior center, and FFH services in McKinley and Cibola Counties should be investigated further.

Hunger and food insecurity remain problems in the region. Alice Perez, Director of the Community Pantry in Gallup, reported that McKinley County is #1 in food insecurity and #1 in child hunger in New Mexico, and the Pantry lost $366,000 in funding this year.

2. ARTS AND CRAFTS INDUSTRIES

Since the 21 strategies of the CEDS 2021 did not include a strategy specifically targeting development of arts and crafts, the Update Survey did not produce many notes on this sector. Further research will be needed to determine the sector's strength and potential to support economic development.

The Cibola EDO mentioned thriving creative industries in Grants-Milan, Acoma, Laguna, Ramah, El Morro, and Fence Lake. Artist Professional Development (Gallup) will need further investigation.

3. CONSTRUCTION

The acute needs for infrastructure upgrades and mixed-income housing developments near job centers and transit corridors throughout the region present opportunities for the construction industry. Housing shortages are a major barrier to economic growth, and the region needs a comprehensive housing strategy.

The impact of mass deportations of immigrants may have a negative effect on the availability of construction workers and should be investigated.

4. GREEN ENERGY RESOURCES

San Juan College was designated a Center of Excellence in Renewable Energy and Industrial Technology, offering specialized training in solar, wind, and energy efficiency technologies such as carbon capture and carbon sequestration.

The region could focus on large-scale solar fields to capitalize on abundant open space and sunshine for solar energy production. Wind and battery storage development are other opportunities as well as microgrid and battery storage pilots in remote communities, especially in partnership with Tribal nations or local co-operatives.

The Community Assistance fund can support clean energy projects and infrastructure development. The NM REAP program can help fund solar energy installations for rural small business and agricultural producers. The Energy Transition Act (ETA), Energy Transition and Just Transition programs can provide assistance to fund workforce retraining and economic diversification planning to help the region weather the shift away from fossil fuels.

5. INDUSTRIAL PARKS

Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation is partnering with Four Corners Economic Development Organization in a contract with a site selector to jointly market McKinley and San Juan Counties to prospective companies within the two organization's respective target industries. The services and requirements of the New Mexico Site Certification and Readiness Program will need further investigation.

Four Corners Airport Industrial Park (in development)

With national site consultants in the lead, Farmington, San Juan County, Four Corners Economic Development, and the New Mexico Partnership completed a systematic review and site-readiness analysis of publicly-owned industrial parks in San Juan County. The review categorized strengths and weaknesses of existing and proposed industrial sites. The review recommended that the City of Farmington develop a new 200-acre industrial park adjoining the Four Corners Regional Airport.

Milan Industrial Park

Development of Milan Industrial Park is the #1 priority for Cibola County Economic Development Foundation for 2025. This 913-acre shovel-ready site is rail-served with access to major transportation routes, has a masterplan and a 90% spec building design. Recent investments have improved water and wastewater facilities and addressed flood plain issues with a channel diversion approved and ready to build.

Utilities are available at the perimeter, but an electric substation is needed. BNSF needs to upgrade the rail spur to the park in accordance with a master rail plan.

Prewitt Industrial Park

This 625-acres facility is 90% master planned and will have direct rail service. The Industrial Park is adjacent to McKinley Paper, a state-of-the-art business manufacturing recycled cardboard packaging for national distribution network.

For the Prewitt facility, New Mexico has created a quasi-governmental special district, "the Authority," to oversee the repurposing of the decommissioned coal-fired Escalante Power Plant. Possibilities include a hydrogen production facility under consideration by Tallgrass Energy, or utilizing geothermal resources to generate electric power.

San Juan county industrial park

EDA sponsored LEDA and EDA ($16 million) along with American Rescue Plan Funds ($23 million) invested in infrastructure upgrades to this 133-acre facility to attract new tenants, resulting in New Mexico Pesco (oil and gas industry services) taking over 45 acres of the site. Other tenants include a film back lot.

6. MAINSTREET PROGRAMS

Downtown revitalization initiatives in the region have produced two catalytic placemaking projects: Complete Streets in Farmington and Coal Avenue Commons in Gallup. All three counties have branding initiatives and carry out "Buy Local" campaigns promoted by Chambers of Commerce to support local markets.

Mainstreet programs

Historic Downtown Farmington MainStreet (accredited) includes an Arts and Cultural District and a calendar of events.

Gallup MainStreet (accredited) and ***Gallup Business Improvement District (BID)*** include Arts and Cultural District, calendar of events, seasonal monthly ArtsCrawl with music, local artisans, food vendors, and small businesses. The BID serves downtown businesses.

Grants MainStreet (accredited) features an annual festival and a calendar of events.

Zuni Pueblo MainStreet (accredited) is America's first Native American MainStreet community in Pueblo of Zuni, featuring a calendar of events, art walks, and the Ancient Way Festival.

7. MINING AND QUARRYING INDUSTRIES

Coal mine and coal plant closures have had a negative effect on jobs in the region. Quarrying operations are ongoing in Cibola and McKinley Counties. There is potential for expansion into quarrying of dimension stone in Cibola County.

Uranium mining has resulted in environmental contamination in Cibola and McKinley Counties. The worst spill of radioactive material in U.S. history occurred in 1979 near Gallup. A possible recent resurgence in uranium mining in Cibola County is expected to use In-Situ Leach Mining (ISL) and In-Situ Recovery (ISR) technologies to mitigate potential further damage.

8. OIL AND GAS EXTRACTION INDUSTRIES

Historically, the oil and gas industry has been the backbone of the regional economy, but a shift away from fossil fuels and efficiencies in oil and gas extraction have had a negative impact on jobs in the region. However, the export capacity continues to support growth in the regional GDP.

Initiatives to repurpose legacy mining and power production infrastructure are being explored. The workforce that could be retrained remains an asset that could support a new economic development strategy.

These profound changes in the region's traditional extractive industries have created a need for jobs related to new technologies in the energy sector such as vertical integration of a facility to produce hydrogen power.

9. REGIONAL COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

Although a previous NWNMCOG Revolving Loan Fund (RLF) program was not sustainable, lessons learned through the project could inform a new initiative to develop a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) in the region. A CDFI is an organization certified by the U.S. Dept. of the Treasury to provide credit and financial services to underserved markets and populations. CDFIs can take the form of a bank, a credit union, loan fund, venture capital fund, micro-enterprise development loan fund, or a community development corporation.

A report on the NWNMCOG RLF project ("Update on CEDS and RLF," Michael Sage) noted that project development had included meetings with over 200 companies and linkages with over two dozen partners in all three counties including Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs), Chambers of Commerce, MainStreet organizations, colleges and universities. Private sector engagement included connections with almost a dozen banks and credit units as well as two dozen business prospects.

The Sage report noted that the project pipeline was dominated by minority female entrepreneurs, that direct one-to-one business outreach worked best with businesses drawn in by competitive interest rates, and the RLF attracted strong interest from startup businesses. Sage recommended integrating any new project with both the CEDS and the EDO Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) programs.

NWNMCOG Initiative

NWNMCOG has led regional planning with stakeholders from tribal governments, local municipalities, and EDOs to develop a Regional Development Corporation (RDC) concept as a core strategy to address persistent poverty and economic exclusion. Feasibility studies explored legal structures, governance models, funding sources, and program focus areas including housing, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy.

The NWNMCOG Board of Directors has adopted Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws for an RDC envisioned as a non-profit intermediary to manage an Empowerment Fund to coordinate regional policy advocacy, support asset-building initiatives, and provide microloans and seed capital for entrepreneurs. Pilot projects such as financial literacy and credit counseling programs and regional housing and infrastructure planning served as proof of concept for RDC's potential role.

Additional roles for a regional nonprofit community development corporation could include:

- provide Individual and Family Development Accounts (IDAs/FDAs) (matched savings programs to help low income individuals save for home ownership, education, or small business startup);
- advocate at a policy level for broadband expansion, childcare access, transportation solutions, tribal and rural equity in state and federal funding;
- provide technical assistance to help local businesses scale up and access procurement opportunities;
- provide business incubators and pop-up markets to support local entrepreneurs.

NWNMCOG and partners continue to seek seed funding to formalize partnerships and governance structures to align the RDC's mission with broader state and federal economic development priorities.

Minnesota Model

Minnesota's North Central Economic Development Association (northcentraleda.org) provides a workable model for an RDC that would support business retention and expansion and entrepreneurship to retain and create good private sector jobs. In this model, the RDC would provide three programs:

- Technical Assistance to increase financial literacy;
- Business Bootcamp classes and workshops to cultivate new skills; and
- Revolving Loan Fund to provide gap financing and increase access to capital.

Financial literacy

Financial literacy and credit counseling programs focused on budgeting, credit repair, and debt reduction are provided by:

- Southwest Native Assets Coalition at Laguna Pueblo
- Navajo Nation Division of Economic Development
- Gallup Housing Authority
- First Nations Development Institute

Additional research is needed to investigate the curricula, participation rates, success rates, and long-term impact of these programs.

10. REGIONAL RETAIL SHOPPING HUB

The region's proximity to an underserved and largely Native American population provides a market for retail and service industries for an estimated 200,000 people in northwest New Mexico and northeast Arizona.

The City of Farmington became one of the first in the state to pass a retail LEDA ordinance. City of Gallup currently is revising local LEDA policies and an application is in development with extensive input and technical assistance from GGEDC.

11. SAFESHORING

Safe Shoring is defined as "locating into areas of the USA to reduce natural disaster and business disruption risks" (Evan Williams, "Building Stronger Together: Safe Shoring," Gallup Independent, 2025).

McKinley County has been named the "Safest County in America" due to relative freedom from catastrophic weather events and dangers of hurricane, earthquake and tornado disasters:

> "My thesis in coining the phrase "safe shoring" is that companies coming back [after COVID-19 disruptions] need to think strategically about these multi-year builds and billion-dollar investments. Why do companies continue to choose the Gulf Coast and places like Houston, TX, and Louisiana that seemingly are in constant re-building mode due to hurricanes and flooding? Well, the answer is simple - access to markets, capital, labor force, infrastructure, and resources. But based on a March 23, 2023, Forbes Magazine article by Brenda Richardson and a CoreLogic report on the "Safest Places to Live" that details the least risky places to live in the US from a natural disaster perspective, the least risky county is -- drum roll please -- McKinley County, New Mexico."
>
> Evan Williams, "Building Stronger Together: Safe Shoring," Gallup Independent, 2025

12. TOURISM ASSETS

The New Mexico tourism website features 18 historic hotels, bed and breakfasts, resorts, inns, and campgrounds in northwest New Mexico. The following marketing blurb for Missoula, MT, could describe any of the cities, towns, and villages in northwest New Mexico:

> Small town charm, urban amenities, vibrant outdoor lifestyle - drawing people in with natural beauty, outdoor recreation, unique cultural offerings.

The International Dark Sky Association has designated International Dark Sky Parks at Chaco Culture National Historic Park and El Morro National Monument. El Malpais National Monument is also listed as a Dark Sky site on newmexico.org.

GGEDC, City of Gallup, McKinley County and Chamber representatives toured Spaceport America and met with Virgin Galactic representatives to discuss launching outdoor recreation and cultural tourism development initiatives in McKinley County to begin developing a network of tourism-related entrepreneurs, such as tour guides and outdoor recreation-related niche service providers to market McKinley County tourism to wealthy Spaceport visitors.

Trail of The Ancients (TOTA)

A federal and state designated Scenic Byway and All American Road with an updated Corridor Management Plan, TOTA runs through all three counties and includes the Ancient Way Arts Trail. The Trail of the Ancients embodies the region's rich scenic, archeological, historic, cultural, natural, and recreational assets and resources. Development and marketing of the TOTA could spark a range of projects targeted to advancing tourism as a major economic driver.

Outdoor Recreation

New Mexico Outdoor Recreation Division (ORD) launched the Outdoor Equity Fund (OEF) to ensure equitable access to outdoor experiences for youth, especially from underserved communities. Almost $2,000,000 invested between 2020 and 2022 connected over 83,000 youth to the outdoors statewide, with significant participation from rural and tribal communities in San Juan, McKinley and Cibola Counties.

Farmington, Gallup, and Grants all have recreation master plans. The City of Grants got an EPA grant under the Recreation Economy for Rural Communities (RERC) Initiative, received a manual and action plan, and the City may have a report on results.

The City of Farmington has invested heavily in the outdoor recreation infrastructure of the area and has created an outdoor recreation manufacturing incubator. Four Corners Economic Development Corporation created the Outdoor Recreation Industry Initiative (ORII).

Planning is underway to develop a substantial open space recreation area on property Gallup Land Partners is dedicating for that purpose. The development will be highlighted at the NM Outdoor Economics Conference which will take place in Gallup in September 2025.

Adventure Gallup and Beyond and Gallup Trails 2010 recreational trail system includes bicycle and equestrian trails in partnership with the Zuni Mountain trail system.

13. TRANSPORTATION AND LOGISTICS ASSETS

• Transcontinental east-west transportation systems

- Interstate 40
- BNSF railroad

• Regional north-south transportation systems

- U.S. Highway 491
- New Mexico State Highway 602

• Airports in all three counties to transport passengers and cargo

Throughout the region, the roads and bridges are in need of maintenance and repair. Railway crossings impede connectivity for communities in McKinley and Cibola Counties, and a recent grant will support feasibility studies to support improvements.

Four Corners Freight Rail Line

The goal of the Four Corners Freight Rail Project is to construct a 100-mile freight rail spur connecting San Juan County and the Navajo Nation in the Four Corners region to the BNSF Southern Transcontinental railway along I-40 corridor in McKinley County.

The project is in the planning stages. A previous study projected freight demand in the region to move $20 billion in energy, agriculture and manufacturing industry products to access national and global markets. With a current $2 million USDOT BUILD grant, San Juan County is evaluating route alignments, transloading facilities, commodities, and environmental impacts.

When completed, the project would integrate the region into the national freight network, support the energy transition, reduce greenhouse gas emissions compared to trucking, and enhance tribal and rural economic inclusion.

Tradeport America

Tradeport America is a Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation (GGEDC) project to develop an inland trade port and logistics hub utilizing *Gallup Energy Logistics Park* (BNSF certified site with access to rail line) and adjacent *McKinley County Business Park* (4 sites available) to attract businesses associated with the community's transportation and logistics assets.

This regionally transformative tradeport and intermodal logistics hub is intended to serve as a multimodal freight and industrial corridor with transloading facilities, warehousing and industrial development zones designed to support freight movement, job creation, and export capacity.

Master planning is underway with a collaboration between GGEDC and McKinley County to position northwest New Mexico as a regional logistics hub supporting supply chain resilience and value-added manufacturing in alignment with federal and state infrastructure priorities. Cibola County may have an interest in creating a Foreign Trade Zone for transloading to capitalize on Tradeport America.

The 2025 New Mexico State Legislature passed the Trade Ports Development Act. The Carbon Coal Road Development Master Plan is in place, and Gallup Land Partners, a local business member of the Greater Gallup EDC BRE Program, has added local jobs as it prepares for development of Tradeport America.

> "The COVID-19 pandemic shined light on single points of failure, especially in the five critical areas of technology: chips & AI, energy, rare earth materials, pharmaceuticals, and defense. So if industry becomes convinced that you can make it here based on improved business climate and lower costs, then how does northwest New Mexico position itself?
>
> Tradeport America takes advantage of this new global trade paradigm and safe shoring, as well as positioning our region to go from a rural outpost to a logistics center of American-led and innovative products that will not only get all boats to rise but ultimately will increase our resiliency to supply shocks and regional emergencies."
>
> Evan Williams, "Building Stronger Together: Safe Shoring," Gallup Independent, 2025.

14. EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

The Northern Local Workforce Development Board serves a ten-county region including Cibola, San Juan and McKinley. According to the Cibola EDO, Cibola feels under-represented compared to McKinley and San Juan Counties. J.D. Weathers, President, or Lisa Ortiz, Executive Director, could be contacted for information about available resources and services.

Digital upskilling and remote work training programs through New Mexico Workforce Connection, San Juan College, UNM-G, and Navajo Tech include digital literacy and orientation to freelancing platforms (e.g. Upwork, Fiverr) to train entrepreneurs for remote work and online businesses. National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) assessments can be integrated into training programs to provide industry-recognized certifications, especially in healthcare, energy, and construction.

Federal Impact Aid legislation has been critical for all three counties to help ensure equitable funding for schools serving Native American students and those on federal lands.

Gallup Youth Leadership and Cibola County Youth Advisory Board give students a voice in local decision-making. New Mexico Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) funds multiple projects in all three counties, employing youth in trail building, park restoration, and environmental education. AmeriCorps program operates through local nonprofits and tribal colleges, offering service-learning opportunities and education awards. Research is needed to investigate Silver Stallion, a program that trains youth in bicycle mechanic and coffee service industries.

Higher education resources

- STEM-based Navajo Tech University
- Center for Advanced Manufacturing ("the Lab") at Navajo Tech
- University of New Mexico branch campus in Gallup
- New Mexico State University branch campus in Grants
- San Juan College
- School of Energy at San Juan College
- Proximity to Sandia and Los Alamos National labs for internships and training

Inter-institutional collaborations between San Juan College, UNM-Gallup, Navajo Tech, and Tribal education departments have focused on shared curriculum development, credit transfer agreements, and joint workforce training programs. UNM Rainforest Innovations (innovations.unm.edu) will need further investigation.

The new NMSU campus president Dr. Marlene Chavez Toivanen has made positive student-centered policy changes, created new curricula, and is receiving strong community support.

San Juan College

San Juan College has been designated a Center of Excellence in Renewable Energy and Industrial Technology. The SJC Energy Transition Academy offers specialized training in solar, wind and energy efficiency technologies.

San Juan College collaborates with Four Corners Economic Development and the Enterprise Center to seek out entrepreneurs and offer resources, guidance, and services to support new businesses in the area.

The ACT Work-Ready Community Certification for San Juan County validates workforce skills and improves employer confidence in local talent (workreadycommunities.org).

Navajo Tech

Navajo Tech has expanded offerings in cybersecurity, veterinary technology, and construction trades, integrating cultural relevance and workforce readiness.

UNM-Gallup

UNM-Gallup hired a highly effective workforce development program manager who has developed certification in response to needs of local businesses.

GALLUP MCKINLEY COUNTY SCHOOL SYSTEM

High School Ambassadors Internship program provides leadership and direction in community-based career skills and internship opportunities with local businesses and tribal enterprises in sectors like tourism, healthcare, and construction.

Career Pathways program is designed to help individuals move from entry-level roles to higher-skilled positions especially in healthcare, energy, and skilled trades. Through partnerships with local and tribal employers, the program aligns high school curricula with regional workforce needs to create clear pathways from education to employment.

Dual Credit programs at GMCS with UNM-G and Shiprock Central Consolidated Schools with San Juan College allow high school students to earn college credits while completing high school.

SOUTHWEST INDIAN FOUNDATION

The Industrial Workforce Program (IWP) trains industrial workers and mechanics and facilitates placement into relevant in-demand jobs in the local economy (industrialworkforceprogram.com).

SOLOWORK

The SoloWork Program was a flagship initiative of the Cibola Communities Economic Development Foundation to help workers transition from traditional to location-neutral careers in customer service, tech support and digital service.

The program provided training and certification for remote work, a coworking space and internet access, job placement with remote-friendly employers. The aim was to provide a fully curated remote work force to out-of-state employers.

Although the program succeeded in proof of concept with many lessons learned and resulted in major upgrades to the county's broadband infrastructure, participation declined and funding ended. To continue to operate, the model would need an annual budget of $200,000 with a full-time director, staff and a facility.