

# THE COLORADO PROJECT

A STRATEGY FOR  
SUSTAINABLE  
AND INCLUSIVE  
ECONOMIC GROWTH



Josef Korbel School  
of International Studies  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

The *Colorado Project* is an initiative of the Doug and Mary Scrivner Institute of Public Policy based at the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of International Studies. We are proud to have hosted and facilitated an extraordinary year-long conversation among a diverse group of Colorado leaders who came together to seek common ground on a strategy for sustainable and inclusive economic growth for our state. In this era of polarization and partisanship, it is a tribute to the participants that they were able to find so much common ground and, when they differed, to find compromises whenever possible.

The strategy put forth in this report is the product of the *Colorado Project* participants. As an academic institution, the University of Denver does not take positions on matters of this kind. We are, however, committed to doing our part to facilitate civil discourse, to inform public deliberation, and to improve policy processes in Colorado.



Dear Colleagues:

Thank you for taking the time to review this strategy. We offer it as the beginning of a discussion with you on how we work together to fulfill Colorado's promise.

We believe Colorado is positioned to redefine what effective leadership means for a country that is desperately in need of more of it. The development of this strategy was only possible because this group of 32 leaders from all over the state came to the table committed to: (1) thinking about how we build prosperity for every community in the state, (2) emphasizing progress over perfection and solutions over political ideology, and (3) approaching our challenges comprehensively and in relationship to one another. We believe this strategy reflects Colorado's admirable culture of collaboration and commitment to shared success.

What's more, we know the collaborators on this project aren't the only ones thinking about the future of Colorado in this way. The members of this group could name hundreds of colleagues throughout Colorado who would have come to this work with the same ambition. Much of this strategy reflects work already happening in the state. We hope those doing that work will see the fact that their effort is highlighted here as a signal of appreciation for how important we believe what they are doing is to a stronger Colorado.

In today's political environment, engaging with those who hold opposing views on complex topics is difficult. To that end, we know that everyone will find something that they don't feel is quite right in this strategy. In fact, many of the collaborators on this project could identify ideas or strategies in this document they don't think yet meet the moment.

We are comfortable with the criticism because we intend this document to be a working document, an attempt at a beginning, and the start of a conversation we hope to have with leaders throughout Colorado. We welcome the continued discussion and disagreement as the only way we will get to the best version of our future, and we look forward to hearing how this strategy could be better.

As we work together to refine it, however, our only ask is that those of you leading nonprofits, businesses, and communities throughout our state commit to the same approach we did in this work and that you look at this strategy not only from how it might help your community or emphasize the issue you care most about, but for how all of it combines to sustain a better future for all of us.

Steve ErkenBrack  
Lisandra Gonzales  
Gloria Schoch  
Co-Chairs, *Colorado Project 2023-2024*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## OVERVIEW

This framework outlines a sustainable and inclusive economic strategy for Colorado. It is an effort to take a comprehensive view of the challenges facing the state's economy and their connection to each other. Our work is based on the premise that, if we are thoughtful and strategic in our approach, Colorado's expanding economy can provide for our long-term sustainability and resilience, the opportunity for all Coloradans to prosper, and the enhanced livability of the state.

The thirty-two collaborators on this document represent a variety of expertise, backgrounds, and political affiliations from different parts of the state. Despite their differences, they have come to work together because of a shared belief that the challenges facing Colorado and the people who live here are interdependent, and that building an economic strategy for the future that reflects a shared vision will lead to a better future for all of us.

This framework is an effort at progress over perfection. The scope of the framework is broad, and it includes recommendations on everything from bolstering tools for water conservation to creating new opportunities for education and training after high school. Though the approach is comprehensive, the recommendations and strategies in the framework are not intended to be. This group includes participants with a variety of expertise, but no one in the group claims to fully understand the nuances behind every issue in this document. The group includes diverse perspectives, but not all the voices who need to be at the table to design and implement lasting change for our state. This work is the beginning of an important conversation, not the end.

While we may not unanimously agree on everything proposed in this document, we do believe it represents alignment around a sound place to start as we design a vision for the future of Colorado. Community and policy leaders across the state will see themselves and their work in this framework, as many people in the state are already working towards several of the recommendations and strategies below. We hope this document demonstrates how vital their ongoing work is and how connected their everyday ambition is to the future of Colorado.

We look forward to their partnership as we work together to move this vision forward. We hope that this framework sparks discussion in boardrooms, local governments, and community organizations around the state about how our economy can grow in a way that sustains us all.

It is difficult to forge consensus in today's political environment. As frequently seen in Washington, D.C., solutions or even progress can be stalled by political polarization. We wanted to try a different approach. We have done this work together because we believe Colorado's future is dependent on our ability to work together across geographies, across identities, and across issues. We all came to this table with different experiences and expertise but also with a common commitment to work together and learn from each other. The work was not easy, but the time we spent together created an environment where we learned more about each other and our state. We believe our approach and our progress towards working together are just as important as the substantive framework outlined below.

## THE FRAMEWORK

This framework has four sections: (1) Colorado's Promise, (2) Sustainability and Resilience, (3) Economic Mobility and Workforce, and (4) Cost of Living. Each section includes recommendations and strategies intended to:

- Grow businesses and jobs in Colorado that increase median income for all Coloradans and drive more access to prosperity in all Colorado communities;
- Achieve quantifiable progress towards healthier and more resilient watersheds, forests, grasslands, rangelands, and working lands, even as our population grows;
- Build an education and training system of lifelong learning pathways that provide family-sustaining careers at a positive Return on Investment (ROI) to all Coloradans, no matter their background, zip code, or age; and
- Ensure a cost of living that is affordable to every Coloradan.

Seizing the tremendous opportunities laid before Colorado will not be as simple as deciding on one priority or solving one issue. Though we all face similar challenges related to sustainable and inclusive economic growth, every region of our state is distinctively its own, with often markedly different assets and obstacles. Strategies that work in one part of our state may not make sense in others. Our challenge is to work together on a shared vision of a sustainable and inclusive economic future for Colorado in a way that is also responsive to the regional differences that make our state what it is.

Each section is important, and all are interdependent. Though we have divided the framework into four sections, real progress on one of these sections is not possible without addressing the others. For example, we simply can't build the workforce we need to fulfill Colorado's promise, without affordable housing, transportation, and childcare. We won't make progress toward more affordable housing without expanding our housing supply. However, building new housing without being strategic and smart about how we use our natural resources will exacerbate our sustainability challenges and stifle economic growth over the long term.

We acknowledge that some of these priorities may be seen as competing with each other, and every strategy in this document faces the obstacle of limitations on public, nonprofit, and private dollars. As with any comprehensive effort, there are trade-offs and compromises to be made as we work together to continue to prioritize, refine, and expand on the ideas in this framework. The collaborators in this effort recognize that we have a unique opportunity if we approach solutions not from a parochial zero-sum perspective but with a recognition that Colorado is strongest when we can benefit from both the vitality of its urban centers and the proven resilience of its rural communities, as a statewide economy needs both.

## THE PROCESS

The *Colorado Project* is an initiative to convene civic, political, and private sector leaders from around the state and region to focus intensively on a core series of locally salient public policy challenges. Launched in July 2023 by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies and the Scrivner Institute of Public Policy at the University of Denver, the *Colorado Project* is a process intended to tackle those practical governance challenges facing our community that have been hampered by polarized debate. The goal is to work with organizations and key policy stakeholders – representing a range of perspectives, from across the non-profit, advocacy, business, civic, and government spheres – to establish common ground in order to move forward with practical solutions geared toward the public good.

The *Colorado Project* hopes to help define the conditions under which community leaders with different political perspectives and backgrounds can come together on a shared strategy for the future. Year over year, the approach will enable us to convene collaborative work in a way that reduces polarization, improves policy approaches, and enhances democratic governance.

### **Our goal in 2023 was to convene a group of policy and community leaders from throughout Colorado who:**

(1) had a variety of expertise relevant to sustainable and inclusive economic growth; (2) represented a diverse set of viewpoints, backgrounds, and geography; and (3) were committed to working together on a shared vision for Colorado. Participants also had to commit to engaging throughout the entire process. The *Colorado Project* team conducted a series of individual interviews with potential *Colorado Project* participants between February and June 2023, where ideas were brought forth and strategies were discussed.

### **Meeting and Engagements:**

Through a series of eight guided workshops and meetings, participants in the *Colorado Project* worked through this year's policy challenge, sharing and discussing their perspectives and proposed solutions. In addition to the meetings, the *Colorado Project* team worked with individuals and small groups of participants to develop and refine ideas. Participants were asked to respond to several drafts of the framework throughout the process.

### **Next Steps:**

The Scrivner Institute of Public Policy and Josef Korbel School of International Studies plan to use this framework as a guide for future initiatives convened by the *Colorado Project*, and will continue to partner with the collaborators on this framework and others on the refinement and evaluation of the recommendations included in this strategy in the years ahead.



# 2023 COLORADO PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

**ALL CONTRIBUTORS ARE LISTED IN THEIR INDIVIDUAL CAPACITY; THEIR WORK ON THIS STRATEGY DOES NOT REPRESENT THEIR VARIOUS AFFILIATIONS**

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Thank you also to Lisa Kauffman, *Senior Strategic Advisor for Governor Polis*, and Eve Lieberman, *Executive Director, Office of Economic Development and International Trade*, for their thoughtful engagement and contribution to this process.

\*Office location listed but the individual works in communities throughout Colorado and, in some cases, throughout the Rocky Mountain West.



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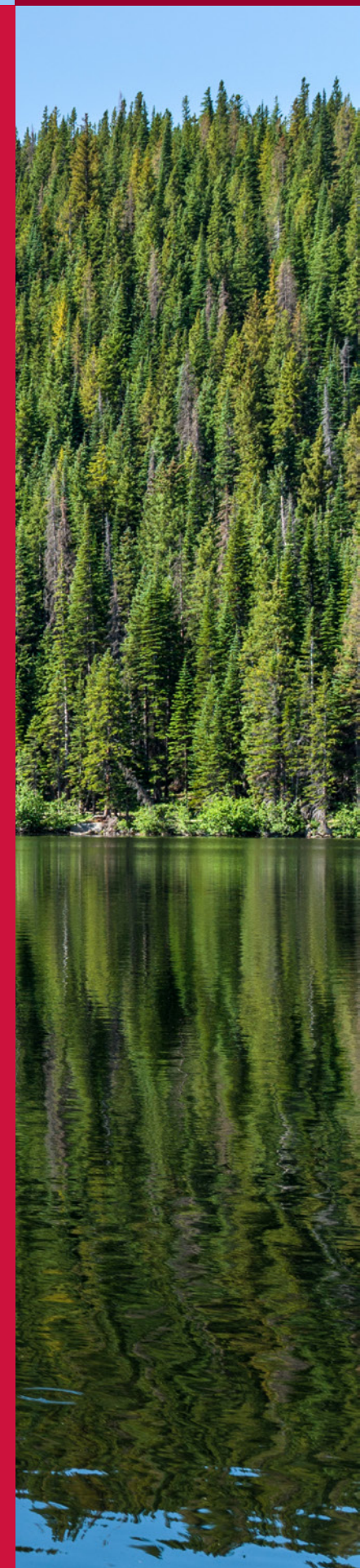
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# THE OPPORTUNITY

**Colorado has an undeniable record of strong economic growth and innovative leadership.** Colorado is the 4th most economically dynamic state in the country.<sup>1</sup> [[Economic Innovation Group](#)]. Our state is the second-largest aerospace economy in the U.S., is home to a thriving bioscience industry, and is a national hub for clean energy, sustainability, and climate technology.<sup>2</sup> [[Colorado OEDIT, 2024](#)]. Colorado's rural areas support a \$47 billion agriculture industry, a \$13.9 billion outdoor industry, and a \$3.25 billion hunting and fishing industry [[Colorado Department of Local Affairs 08/2023](#), [U.S Department of Commerce 11/2023](#), [Colorado Wildlife Council 2022](#)]. Our state is home to five major military installations and five strategic commands which generate \$2.8 billion in annual payroll and serve as the foundation for new businesses and innovation in the private sector across the state. [[Colorado OEDIT, 2024](#)]. Denver is rapidly gaining a national share of jobs in digital technology [[Brookings 12/2023](#)], and Colorado recently won designation as a national technology hub for quantum technology. [[Colorado Sun 10/23](#)].

**Though job growth in the state is slowing slightly, Colorado had a strong recovery from the pandemic and has maintained an unemployment rate of about 3% since May 2022.** [[CO State Demography Office 8/23](#), [State Demography Summit, 11/23](#)]. Labor force participation in Colorado is the 4th highest in the U.S. at 68.7%. [[Colorado Secretary of State, 6/2023](#)]. We have one of the most educated labor forces in the nation, and Colorado has won recognition for its game-changing work to build modern and flexible learning pathways to support a changing workforce. [[Wallet Hub 2023](#), [Metro Denver EDC](#)].

**The demographics underpinning economic growth in the state are changing.** Colorado's population is aging and growing more diverse. Coloradans over 65 are the fastest-growing age cohort in Colorado, and the state can expect around 40,000 retirements annually in the coming years. [[CO State Demography Office, CPR 11/2023](#)]. Colorado's net migration, from which the state has drawn much of its workforce in the past, is expected to slow to a third of what it was over the next decade. [[CO State Demography Office 8/2023](#), [Rocky Mountain PBS, 11/2023](#)]. More than 40% of Coloradans ages 0-24 are people of color, compared to around 35% of those aged 25-44 and 25% of those aged 45-65.<sup>3</sup> [[CO State Demography Office](#)]. Those factors, combined with our slowing birth rate, indicate a trend towards slower overall population growth and a more diverse population in the state. Eighty-three percent of Colorado's population lives on the Front Range, and 17% lives in rural areas [[CO State Demography Office](#)], and even with slowed growth, we can expect about an additional 1.7 million people in Colorado by 2050. [[CO State Demography Office](#)].

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1 According to the Economic Innovation Group, "the concept of dynamism captures the intrinsic vitality of an economy: how quickly it changes, how efficiently it redeploys its resources to the most productive use, and how successfully it translates experimentation into opportunity." Metrics that lead to this calculation include a state's core startup rate, share of workers at firms less than five years old, growth in total firms, inventors per 1,000 residents, housing permits per 1,000 residents, worker churn, labor force participation rate, and migration rate.

2 For example, under the leadership of then Speaker Lola Spradley, Colorado was the first state in the country to pass a Renewable Electricity Standard (RES) via ballot initiative in 2004. [[Governor's Energy Office, 2010](#)]. The state is 8th in the country for advanced energy bills passed between 2011-2021, and, in 2023, Colorado and Wyoming joined in an MOU to jointly work on direct air capture. [[Colorado Sun, 6/2023](#)].

3 Colorado's population is currently 23% Latino, 4% African American, 3.5% Asian and 66% White. [[Colorado Demography Office](#)].



**Despite our proven success we have left some people and communities behind, and an enormous amount of untapped potential on the table, because of gaps in access to our shared prosperity.** Due to historical and systemic discrimination, the differences in median household net worth for Coloradans by ethnicity are stark, including: \$317,430 for Whites, \$25,520 for Latino populations, and \$7,000 for African Americans. [[Prosperity Now](#)]. Current median household income for White Coloradans (at about \$87,000 per year) is about \$20,000 more than Latinos and almost \$30,000 more than African Americans living in the state. [[Prosperity Now](#)]. Twenty-two percent of African American kids in Colorado and 17% of Latino kids in the state are living in poverty, compared to 7% of White kids. [[2023 Colorado Kids Count Survey](#)].

**Our economic growth is disproportionately concentrated geographically.** Ninety-five percent of Colorado's job and population growth between 2010 and 2020 was on the Front Range [[CO State Demography Office 8/23](#)]. The household median income in the Denver Metro Area is between \$30,000 and \$40,000 more than that in rural communities throughout the state [[U.S Census Bureau](#)], and the top five counties with the highest rates of kids in poverty are in rural Colorado. [[2023 Colorado Kids Count Survey](#)].

**We see the stresses on opportunity in Colorado as interrelated and addressing them as an opportunity to catalyze shared economic prosperity.** Colorado has a job vacancy rate of more than two jobs for every unemployed person. [[Bureau of Labor Statistics](#)]. The labor shortage costs the state \$46 billion annually in GDP. [[Common Sense Institute](#)]. Untapped talent is our greatest economic resource, but Colorado's educational and training infrastructure is not yet preparing all Coloradans in a way that will enable employers to fill open jobs or allow the economy to make up for increasing retirements and slowed migration into the state. Ninety percent of in-demand jobs in Colorado that provide a living wage require some type of education after high school, but 66% of Coloradans will not earn a post-secondary credential. [[CDHE Strategic Plan, 1/2023](#)]. Those who do not access post-secondary education are disproportionately Coloradans of color. [[CDHE Strategic Plan, 1/2023](#)].

**Housing, health care, childcare, and transportation costs have combined to create a higher cost of living in Colorado that makes prosperity less attainable and contributes to slowed migration into the state.** [[Colorado Sun 10/7/23](#)]. Colorado is the 6th most expensive state in which to own a home and the 12th most expensive state in which to rent. [[Roadmap to Colorado's Future - 2026](#)]. The number of people experiencing homelessness in the Denver Metro Area went up 31.7% between 2022 and 2023 to around 9,000 people. [[Metro Denver Homelessness Initiative](#)]. In 2022, Colorado's average annual cost of center-based childcare for a toddler (if a family could find a spot) was 14% of the median income for a married couple and 41% of the median income for a single parent. [[Colorado Kids Count Report](#)]. Thirty percent of low and middle-income Coloradans struggled to pay medical bills and premiums last year. [[Colorado Health Institute](#)].

**Colorado’s economic growth, population growth, and the sustainability and resilience of our natural resources depend on one another.** From the farmers and ranchers producing food in rural Colorado to the new businesses across the state built on outdoor recreation and innovative energy technology, our entire economy relies on a stable and sustainable relationship with our environment. The water that flows down both sides of the Continental Divide and through our forests<sup>4</sup> is the lifeblood of our urban centers and the communities it feeds along the way. The Colorado Water Plan estimates we could need an additional 740,000 acre-feet of water to meet our growing industrial and municipal needs. [[Colorado Water Plan](#)]. Our public<sup>5</sup> and private lands, western landscapes, and active way of life have always drawn people to the state, and they must stay healthy to continue to sustain our tourism, agriculture, and outdoor recreation industries. Private farmers and ranchers steward much of the landscape that defines Colorado and invest their time and resources into supporting wildlife, conserving water, and maintaining healthy landscapes. That farmland is diminishing. From 1982 to 2017, Colorado lost over 25% of its farmland in part to growth. [[Colorado Climate Preparedness Plan](#)]. The Denver Metro Area and northern Front Range suffer from air quality challenges like ozone, which disproportionately impact the health and increase health costs for our most vulnerable community members, including children and seniors. [[Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment](#)].

**Our economy is tied to the changing climate.** The Rocky Mountain West is warming faster than the national average. [[Environmental Protection Agency](#)]. The change has already resulted in reductions in snowpack, soil moisture, and stream flows. [[Colorado Climate Preparedness Roadmap](#)]. Higher temperatures contribute to more frequent and intense wildfires, heat waves, drought, and extreme weather events, all of which carry a high price tag. [[Colorado Climate Preparedness Plan](#), [National Centers for Environmental Information](#)]. According to the National Centers for Environmental Information, the cost of extreme drought in Colorado in the last five years was between \$2-\$5 billion. The cost of wildfire to the state over the same period was between \$5-10 billion. [[National Centers for Environmental Information](#)].<sup>6</sup> Home insurance costs have increased 51.7% in part because of the increased possibility of wildfire. [[Colorado Department of Regulatory Affairs](#)].

**Given the close ties between our environment and our economic prosperity, we simply must be strategic about how we grow.** Population growth and climate change are forcing us to think differently about how we grow our food, use our water, manage our forests, get from place to place, and build our neighborhoods. For many people, the housing near where they work is not affordable. This fact drives people to seek more affordable housing further away from community centers. Developers continue to expand housing outwards, which not only increases transportation costs for people, infrastructure costs for communities, and transportation pollution but also exacerbates our water sustainability challenges. [[Roadmap to Colorado’s Future - 2026](#)].

**Our response to climate change represents an enormous economic growth opportunity for Colorado but also is a strain on local economies dependent on fossil fuel extraction.** Transitioning to a carbon-neutral energy system will require \$4.2 trillion in global capital investment by 2030. [[World Energy Outlook 2022](#)]. Jobs in clean energy are the fastest growing in the state, and the National Renewable Energy Laboratory

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4 Our water supply depends on healthy forests, making the increase in wildfire risk dangerous for the communities the wildfires touch, and for all of those downstream who rely on clean water. [[US Forest Service](#)]

5 Colorado is home to 8.3 million acres of public land [[Bureau of Land Management](#)]. Nearly three-quarters of Colorado’s forest lands are publicly-owned. [[US Forest Service](#)]

6 Note: This is compared to \$1 billion to \$2 billion in costs for drought, and \$250 million to \$500 million for wildfire between 1980-1989 (CPI Adjusted). [[National Centers for Environmental Information](#)]

(NREL) estimates that Colorado could see up to 45,000 additional jobs by 2050 in clean energy and energy efficiency alone. [[2023 Talent Pipeline Report, NREL](#)]. The state will also require many more people to build climate-resilient infrastructure, maintain healthy forests, avoid negative impacts on biodiversity, and update our water infrastructure. However, the energy transition is also pushing Colorado communities that rely on the extraction and burning of fossil fuels to rethink their path toward economic sustainability. [[CSU Center for New Energy Economy](#)]. In Pueblo County, for example, the shutdown of the three Comanche power plant units will cost the county 90% of its annual tax revenue, and the community is now working with Xcel and others to identify an economically viable path forward. [[Colorado Sun, 1/2024](#)].

**We are at a historic moment when we can expect an unprecedented level of federal investment in our state.** Due to the passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), Colorado can expect \$5 billion of federal investment into the state for everything from roads and rail to water infrastructure and clean energy deployment. At the same time, private industry is investing up to \$7 billion in semiconductors and clean power. [[Invest.gov](#)]. We have an opportunity to use this massive investment in a way that catalyzes more private dollars into the state and creates a foundation for sustainable and inclusive economic prosperity in the years to come.

**The economy is changing, and we have an opportunity to use this moment to define a vibrant economic future for all Coloradans.** We are up to the task. Colorado has a record and commitment to sustaining long-term public-private collaborations that lead to innovative solutions and lasting, positive change. On the surface, our wide-open spaces may seem to provide ample land for expansion, but we are home to vibrant agriculture, outdoor recreation, and hunting and fishing industries because of a long-standing and bipartisan agreement that some areas make sense to develop and certain areas are more valuable when managed for other attributes. Our location at the headwaters of the Colorado River has put us in the middle of collaborative efforts to determine how we steward and share our water resources for generations. Our state's successful effort to keep Space Command in Colorado is the most recent example demonstrating our incredible capacity to pull together in support of a stronger state. We know how to tackle difficult challenges. We now have an incredible opportunity to do so in a way that serves all of us.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We integrated the following guiding principles throughout our work, and we believe they apply to the entire framework.

## A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH IS NEEDED BECAUSE OUR CHALLENGES ARE CONNECTED

We came together based on the premise that we cannot solve our state's challenges in a meaningful way through a siloed approach. A long-term strategy on housing, for example, will not work without incorporating a strategy to ensure water sustainability, ensuring we have the workforce to build it, and without integrating affordable transportation options and supportive infrastructure. Where possible, we believe we will make more progress with an approach to our challenges that reflects their interdependence on each other.

## WE AREN'T ALL STARTING FROM THE SAME PLACE; PARTNERSHIP ON SOLUTIONS IS CRITICAL

Our current approach to economic growth is not adequately serving people of color, people living in rural communities, or low-income residents in Colorado. We cannot achieve inclusive economic growth without acknowledging the role our history and systems have played in leaving Black, Latino, Indigenous, and other Coloradans of color out of our shared prosperity and growth. In addition, the urban-rural divide is a reality. Imposing broad recommendations that ostensibly benefit the entire state, the rural areas are often challenged to meet new requirements because of financial limitations, infrastructure challenges, and workforce gaps.

In all cases, inclusive economic growth means finding ways to expand access to opportunities for economic growth and prosperity through working in partnership with the communities left behind. We can have statewide goals, but these goals must allow enough flexibility to integrate innovative solutions that work on the ground in a way that works for different people and in different parts of the state.

## THE HEALTH OF OUR ENVIRONMENT IS OUR FOUNDATION

The foundation of Colorado's economy is a healthy environment. The next generation of workers will be drawn to our mountains and rivers, just as generations before have been, which gives Colorado an extraordinary advantage over many other states. The people, families, and businesses that make up our economy rely on our resource base, including a clean and reliable water supply, clean air, healthy natural lands, and a stable climate. A sound economic strategy for Colorado must allow for economic growth to occur in a way that sustains our natural resources and a healthy environment across the state.

## RURAL COLORADO IS A COMPETITIVE ASSET AND COLORADO CITIES ATTRACT INVESTMENT. BOTH ARE CRITICAL TO OUR SHARED SUCCESS.

Rural Colorado is home to people and communities used to working with constrained resources, thinking and living innovatively to solve difficult challenges, and forming collaborative partnerships to move their communities forward. It is where we grow our food and steward our natural resources, and it is home to our mountains, public lands, and vast landscapes. Rural Colorado is a central motive for people to come to visit Colorado and the reason that many come here to stay. The creative and pragmatic thinking found there is a

competitive asset in our collaborative work to achieve sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Colorado's city centers are magnets for new business opportunities, outside investment, and top talent. They are the home of the majority of Colorado's growing and increasingly diverse population and are at the foundation of Colorado's ability to lead the way through the changing economy.

Some of the recommendations and strategies in this document work better in urban areas, while others will work better in Colorado's rural areas. We believe that the future of Colorado depends on finding a pathway to prosperity for both.

## **WE WILL BE MORE SUCCESSFUL WITH A REGIONAL APPROACH IN THE STATE**

Colorado's economy is a web of interdependent communities, and our challenges do not stop at city, county, or state borders. Regional collaboration is essential to harnessing Colorado's potential, but city and county units are the basis for governance structures, laws, regulations, and incentives. In cases where regional governance exists, the borders of the regional entities often do not align with each other. It should be easier for towns, cities, and counties to work together on everything from housing and apprenticeships to infrastructure, energy efficiency, and water conservation. Defining the right geographic areas and the right institutional capacity to facilitate formal regional collaboration across issues is important work as it would provide us with a new tool to use on our most significant policy challenges.

## **THE FUTURE WILL REQUIRE CAPITAL INVESTMENT FROM THE PUBLIC SECTOR, PRIVATE SECTOR, AND PHILANTHROPY**

Turning many of the recommendations below into a reality will require a significant capital investment. We are not recommending that all of this investment come from the public sector. Rather, this framework provides a guide for how both the public and private sectors can prioritize the investment of their capital in a way that strategically aligns with a sustainable and inclusive economy for all of Colorado.

## **INFRASTRUCTURE AND CONNECTIVITY ARE REQUIRED FOR SUCCESS**

Almost every section in this framework references the need for resilient and efficient infrastructure as a foundation for economic growth. Broadband is the rural electrification issue of our time, and the financial resources and government support to accomplish universal broadband access are essential. Expanded transmission capacity and charging stations for electric vehicles are critical to meeting our state climate emissions targets. New and bigger thinking is needed around the rail, bus service, and other public transit options that are lifelines for people and communities across the state to economic opportunities. In addition, investments in water infrastructure that support conservation and improved water quality are essential to every community in the state.

# COLORADO'S PROMISE

The recommendations and strategies in this section are intended to grow businesses and jobs in the state that increase the median income for all Coloradans and drive more access to prosperity in all Colorado communities. They include steps to build an entrepreneurial ecosystem that works for every Coloradan, develop a comprehensive strategy to make Colorado the best place to live and work, and catalyze the expansion of industry sectors where Colorado is already a leader. The recommendations also prioritize the revitalization of the parts of Colorado's economy that are in transition because of the changing economy.

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Build an entrepreneurial ecosystem in Colorado that is accessible to every current and future business owner.**

### STRATEGY 1:

**Identify and address the gaps in Colorado's entrepreneurial ecosystem that impede access to starting and growing a business.**

- Create a publicly available statewide asset map of Colorado's entrepreneurial ecosystem, including: the continuum of potential capital investment, technical assistance, government grants, training opportunities, nonprofits, federal labs, incubators, accelerators, and leadership and mentorship opportunities.
- Evaluate the success of the current entrepreneurial ecosystem in delivering results for business owners, especially those in underserved communities.
- Document the gaps in the entrepreneurial ecosystem that impede new business starts and growth, and create a strategy to address those gaps.

### STRATEGY 2:

**Continue ongoing work to increase the availability of capital to Colorado entrepreneurs and to ensure underserved communities can compete for resources.**

- Continue to drive a statewide push to increase overall capital investment into businesses throughout the state.
- Continue to expand access to flexible, small startup grants and concessionary loans to entrepreneurs who lack access to personal startup capital.
- Build on existing efforts by Colorado business and banking leaders to collaboratively leverage their assets in support of new small businesses across the state.
- Continue to expand the reach and scale of Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs).
- Expand the state Venture Capital Authority's (VCA) capacity to make anchor investments in private venture capital funds.
- Leverage incoming federal investment as a tool to draw more private capital into Colorado.
- Implement and expand access to public, private, and philanthropic capital, including access to state-level tools like the State Small Business Credit Initiative (SSBCI), the Start Up Loan, and CLIMBER funds.

### **STRATEGY 3:**

**Strengthen the small business ecosystem through outreach and awareness building, support resources, and mentorship.**

- Provide support resources<sup>7</sup> to community economic development professionals that aid their efforts to make the case to new investors about potential investment opportunities in their communities.<sup>8</sup>
- Increase awareness about resources that provide information to new business owners about what type of capital is available, how to effectively present their business to lenders, and how to win and use new capital.
- Continue efforts through the Colorado Startup Loan Fund to simplify and expedite capital application processes in a way that enables a single entrepreneur with limited time and resources to effectively apply for and win funding from multiple funding streams.
- Increase the capacity of Small Business Development Centers (SBDCs) to assist and guide entrepreneurs in effectively developing, creating, and growing a business.
- Expand investment into organizations that have proven successful in mentoring and growing business started by underrepresented founders.
- Share best practices and lessons learned across Colorado counties.

## **2**

### **RECOMMENDATION 2:**

**Make Colorado the best place in the country to live, work, and play.**

### **STRATEGY 1:**

**Remove barriers that make it difficult to fill in-demand jobs.**

- Continue work towards expanding access to affordable and attainable housing.
- Continue work to expand access to affordable, quality, early childcare and development options.
- Continue work to expand and scale options for employer-connected, skills-based, lifelong education and training in every region of the state and for all ages.
- Create more affordable opportunities for Coloradans to live close to where they work, and continue efforts to expand transit and rail.
- Integrate reforms to our federal immigration system that streamline and improve programs for work visas.<sup>9</sup>
- Support efforts to ensure that communities are safe across the state.

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<sup>7</sup> Eg: online tools, no cost consulting, seminars, workshops, and others.

<sup>8</sup> In 2021, Colorado expanded the Rural Jump-Start Program. The Rural Jump-Start Program is a collaborative effort by the state, local governments, Institutes of Higher Education, and economic development organizations to incentivize new businesses to start in or move to rural, economically distressed counties in Colorado, which are referred to as Rural Jump-Start zones, and hire new employees. [OEDIT 2024]

<sup>9</sup> We have seen the need for comprehensive immigration reform at the federal level very clearly in recent months due to the influx of migrants to our state. “Nearly 36,000 migrants have arrived in Denver over the past year... The migrant response will cost the city \$160 million to \$180 million in next fiscal year’s budget.” [Colorado Sun 1/2024].

## **STRATEGY 2:**

**Continue to work to achieve 99% broadband connectivity to households across the state.**

- Upgrade accuracy of GIS (speed test) mapping to identify underserved populations.
- Ensure a long-term and continuously evolving definition of a minimum speed standard.
- Continue to compete for federal infrastructure funding to support broadband expansion.
- Continue to budget state-level funding and resources towards infrastructure development.
- Ensure maximized access to public rights-of-way to facilitate development.
- Expand access for broadband providers to state-owned dark fiber for long-haul and middle-mile data transport via reasonable pricing and or strand swapping.
- Provide incentives for broadband operators to invest in the most advanced technologies.
- Establish truth-in-advertising to comparison standards as a means to drive affordable service offerings.
- Initiate statewide performance reporting to promote consumer confidence in broadband performance amongst providers.

## **STRATEGY 3:**

**Leverage Colorado's outdoor assets as an economic driver.**

- Build on Colorado's unique juxtaposition of leadership in the digital tech, aerospace, telecomm, and information technology and opportunities for outdoor recreation as a way to broaden and diversify both the workforce and local economies across the state.
- Leverage and expand on Colorado's unprecedented legacy of investments in conservation and sustainable outdoor recreation as a tool to draw in new businesses and a broader workforce.
- Invest in and prioritize the long-term resilience of our outdoor assets.

# 3

## **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Sustain and expand growth in sectors where Colorado is already a leader.**

## **STRATEGY 1:**

**Identify and build on industry sectors that align with our statewide prosperity and sustainability goals.<sup>10</sup>**

- Update state data and mapping of advanced industry sectors where Colorado has or could have a comparative advantage, and overlay that map with demographic and regional data demonstrating current gaps and potential growth.
- Work with agricultural producers, water leaders, state government, and rural community leaders to develop a statewide strategy to ensure the long term resilience of Colorado's agricultural industry.
- Explore and offer opportunities to attract and retain heritage tourism, develop new venues for tourism, and host new festivals and events.
- Convene public-private partners to develop an updated statewide strategy to maintain Colorado's leadership in the sustainability, climate resilience, and climate technology industries.

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<sup>10</sup> Note that this is a sample and not a complete list of industry sectors where Colorado is already a leader.



- Continue to build on Colorado’s leadership in the outdoor industry, including increasing investment in the protection of the state’s wild landscapes, rivers, and wildlife populations.
- Build on Colorado’s recent designation as a quantum “Tech Hub” as a potential catalyst for inclusive growth, including prioritizing the recruitment of underrepresented founders and through creating innovative educational upskilling opportunities.
- Build on Colorado’s growing leadership in the film and creative industries.

## **4 RECOMMENDATION 4:** **Prioritize the revitalization of economic centers in transition because of the changing economy.**

### **STRATEGY 1:**

**Continue to partner with communities transitioning away from the extraction and burning of fossil fuels on a strategy for long-term economic prosperity.**

- Leverage federal investment in community infrastructure to spark new opportunities to attract new industries (eg. Outdoor Industry, Forest Products) and business development to communities losing fossil fuel revenue.
- Leverage and create innovative opportunities to attract and retain workers to sustain new community businesses and economic opportunities.
- Include strategic and monetary support for economies damaged through the transition, including the consideration of temporary revenue replacement.
- Coordinate and leverage state economic development programs like Just Transition awards, Rural Jump Start, Enterprise Zones and others to aid community efforts to promote economic diversification and resilience.
- Support and fund the preservation of water rights associated with retiring coal-fired power plants for the benefit of the state, the local community and the environment.

### **STRATEGY 2:**

**Work with public and private partners to revitalize downtown Denver and rural main streets across the state.**

- Amplify ongoing efforts to revitalize downtown Denver and to develop a strategy for the long-term viability of Denver’s office space given the prevalence of remote and hybrid work.
- Partner with rural leaders across the state on an updated strategy to ensure the revitalization of rural main streets and communities across Colorado.
- Leverage and build on higher education institutions, workforce development, and upskilling programs in rural areas as centers for current and future economic growth.



## HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESS

### Access Mode

**Access Mode** provides programming that is available to exceptional tech-driven Black, Latino, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous tech founders in Colorado and beyond. It provides \$20,000 in equity-free funding to accepted startups, as well as mentoring that is customized to each company. Startups may be incorporated or not and have revenue or not. They may have raised funding, be currently raising, or not raising funds. In six months or less, Access Mode delivers scalable impact, focused on propelling companies from the prototype stage to paid customer engagement. At the end of the program, founders have lifelong membership in an alumni network providing support for the entire entrepreneurial journey.

# SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE

The recommendations and strategies below are intended to support quantifiable progress towards healthier and more resilient watersheds, forests, grasslands, rangelands, and working lands in Colorado, even as our population grows. They prioritize maintaining resilient natural infrastructure and working landscapes now as an economic imperative for the future, especially as it relates to our water future. They emphasize a state-wide approach to sustainability and resilience that allows for local leadership and reflects local realities, and they recommend accelerating Colorado's transition towards a carbon-neutral economy in a way that balances affordability and reliability for consumers and communities.

Though a strategy to ensure sustainability and resilience may look different depending on where it is implemented in Colorado, the recommendations below outline opportunities for communities across the state to be more strategic about how they grow. Enabling a more compact footprint for our urban and urbanizing areas will help protect the natural and working landscapes outside of those communities while also promoting more efficient use of scarce water supplies.

This strategy also identifies Colorado's path towards a carbon-neutral economy as important to our state's long-term economic prosperity. The recommendations below outline steps we can take to progress towards a carbon-neutral economy in a way that will reduce our greenhouse gas emissions and reduce or sustain costs for consumers, especially in our power generation, transportation and building sectors. As we work towards a carbon-neutral energy future, we will only be successful if we address barriers through inclusive stakeholder engagement that deepens our understanding of unintended consequences in the future. We must fully understand the comprehensive picture, including impacts from climate change, impacts to affordability and reliability, and impacts to the state and local economies. This balance will become increasingly difficult as we get closer to our net-zero targets and progress becomes increasingly expensive. We believe finding the balance is possible, and that our economy depends on achieving the right equilibrium and defining a path forward that integrates our climate targets, affordability, reliability, and impacts to local communities all at once.

## RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Respect the limitations of our water resources and prepare for a more unpredictable water future.**

## STRATEGY 1:

**Mitigate and prepare for the impacts of a warming climate on water supplies and demands, watershed and forest health, water-based recreation, and the aquatic environment.**

- Foster a collaborative basin and statewide approach to water management, guided by the Colorado Water Plan<sup>11</sup>, to balance multiple objectives in a way that ensures economic success across urban, rural, and recreation sectors and achieves environmental sustainability over the long-term.

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<sup>11</sup> The Colorado Water Plan “is a grassroots effort, and relies on the Colorado water community to identify and implement basin-specific and/or statewide water projects that provide multiple benefits to the state’s diverse water users. The Colorado Water Conservation Board (CWCB) creates and manages the Water Plan framework, and supports the state’s water community with funding and technical resources to implement programs and projects.”

- Incentivize partnerships and funding between federal and state governments, local jurisdictions, non-profit organizations, water and electric utilities, private landowners, and others to enhance watershed and forest health, and promote climate change resiliency.
- Expand state and regional incentives and other mechanisms that promote mutually beneficial partnerships, like collaborative water sharing agreements, to meet water supply needs.

## **STRATEGY 2:**

### **Incentivize conservation of our water resources.**

- Develop and scale new and innovative approaches to water conservation across the municipal, industrial, and agricultural sectors across the state.
- Develop a guide outlining best practices for water management and use in local land use codes in a way that is tied to the overall health of the water basin and balances water for agriculture, municipal use, and environmental conservation.
- Incentivize and require landscaping that is more appropriate to the Colorado climate.
- Incentivize and fund improvements to aging agricultural infrastructure and agricultural practices to make the industry more drought resilient.
- Fully fund the Colorado Water Plan.
- Promote land use policies that foster water-efficient urban development.

## **STRATEGY 3:**

### **Support water quality standards, practices, and efforts that result in clean drinking water, rivers, aquifers, and lakes for all of Colorado.**

- Support the creation and enforcement of anti-degradation standards in both urban and rural environments that result in clean water bodies for all communities, including and especially historically disenfranchised communities.
- Support investments in natural and manmade water infrastructure that preserves and improves the natural environment as we adapt to climate change.

## **HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESS**

### **Pueblo Community Health Center**

**Pueblo Community Health Center** recently opened operations as the first net-zero health center in the country. Offering a wide range of professional healthcare services, the health center is able to provide Pueblo citizens with the services they need while simultaneously working to achieve the city of Pueblo's plan to transition to 100% renewable energy by 2035. This change has saved the health center \$45,000 on annual energy costs, while simultaneously reducing their energy use by 50%.



## **2** **RECOMMENDATION 2:** Integrate the long-term resilience and sustainability of our watersheds, landscapes, and biodiversity into strategic planning for economic growth.

### **STRATEGY 1:**

#### **Discourage sprawling and unplanned development.**

- Incentivize policies to support compact growth within and adjacent to existing communities, while discouraging sprawling or unplanned development on Colorado’s natural and working landscapes.
- Incentivize opportunities to use infill land or property to meet growth objectives instead of expanding outwards.
- Support efforts to increase affordability, expand transit services and transit-oriented development, and reduce air quality impacts especially in communities that disproportionately lack access to transportation options or are disproportionately burdened by pollution.

### **STRATEGY 2:**

#### **Create incentives to promote regional and holistic growth strategies that integrate housing, transit, infrastructure, energy efficiency, and land and water use.**

- Design a comprehensive system of tax credits, government grants, and other incentives for communities that integrate and implement holistic growth planning.
- Support alignment of state programs, policies and funding streams with strategic growth objectives around infill development, affordability, energy, water conservation, biodiversity conservation, climate goals, air quality, and open space and agricultural land conservation.<sup>12</sup>
- Ensure, incentivize, and support partnerships for energy and water efficient development.

### **STRATEGY 3:**

#### **Incorporate climate hazard mitigation and resilience in land use planning.**

- Discourage new development in areas prone to climate-related natural disasters such as wildfire and flooding.
- Support fireproof construction materials and practices, and wildfire mitigation around homes in the wildland urban interface.
- Restore and protect green infrastructure that promotes climate resilience, such as tree plantings to reduce urban heat island effects and healthy riparian ecosystems to absorb floodwaters.

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<sup>12</sup> In August 2023, Governor Polis issued [Executive Order D 2023 014](#) in an effort to align state agency resources to incentivize holistic growth planning and the expedited construction of affordable housing in Colorado.

#### **STRATEGY 4:**

**Quantify how potential development will affect our environment and use of natural resources in real time.**

- Build and make publicly available a statewide database that measures the economic impact of current and predicted changes to natural ecosystems, including any current or predicted degradation to our forests, air, watersheds, landscapes, and biodiversity.
- Build and make publicly available a statewide database that measures the benefits of a healthy ecosystem and ecosystem restoration (eg: landowner led water conservation) to our economy.



#### **RECOMMENDATION 3:**

**Work in partnership to protect the rural landscapes, public lands, and watersheds that sustain Colorado agriculture, our outdoor industry, and our economy.**

#### **STRATEGY 1:**

**Expand tools to ensure the long-term economic viability of Colorado's private working lands, agriculture, rural communities, and land stewardship.**

- Partner with Colorado landowners to design and expand state compensation and tax credits for ecosystem services, including water conservation, stewardship of wildlife habitat, and carbon sequestration.
- Reauthorize and expand the state tax credit for conservation easements on private working lands.
- Invest in the support and expansion of regional food systems that enable Colorado's farmers and ranchers to grow, process, and sell food grown in Colorado to people across the state.
- Prioritize the strategic coordination of local and state public and private funding to enable Colorado agriculture to take full advantage of potential federal dollars.
- Support the next generation of rural landowners and managers with a strategy to enable more young farmers and ranchers to purchase and lease land, and explore a career in agriculture.
- Expand training options and recruitment for in-demand jobs that support agriculture operations.

#### **STRATEGY 2:**

**Protect and invest in the resilience of our natural resources, public lands, and natural infrastructure.**

- Prioritize public and private investment into the long-term protection and resilience of our forests, rangelands, watersheds, rivers, wildlife habitat and other natural infrastructure.
- Refine our strategy to manage public lands to ensure the long-term health of our western landscapes while adequately balancing the needs of fire resilience, recreation, agriculture, and the environment.

# 4

## **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

**Continue progress towards, and expedite where possible, Colorado’s transition towards a carbon-neutral economy, while balancing affordability and reliability.**

### **STRATEGY 1:**

**Advance additional policies for complete transition to a net-zero Colorado economy.**

- Continue progress towards, and expedite where possible, Colorado’s plan to reach 80% carbon free electricity on the electric grid by 2030, and 99% by 2040, while also balancing energy affordability and reliability.
- Ensure energy affordability and shared benefits and costs when considering clean energy projects, updated and new infrastructure, and stranded fossil fuel assets.
- Continue to catalyze research and development of new energy technologies and clean energy innovation in the public and private sectors that will cut greenhouse gas emissions and be both reliable and increasingly affordable for the consumer.
- Achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions from heating systems while balancing affordability and reliability.

### **STRATEGY 2:**

**Advance initiatives to catalyze the rapidly changing energy economy in a way that supports statewide mobility, affordability, and access.**

- Reduce total state vehicle miles traveled through expanded statewide options for transit and rail, and expanded multimodal options like biking, walking, and access to electric bikes and scooters.
- Incentivize the options for consumers to easily adopt electric vehicles and remove barriers to access charging stations statewide.
- Expand state initiatives that increase the upfront affordability of energy efficient homes and buildings, both in terms of new construction and to retrofit existing construction.
- Enable all communities to take full advantage of potential tax incentives from federal infrastructure and energy funding.

# ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND WORKFORCE

Colorado has a tremendous opportunity to support new economic opportunity and mobility in every community through the development of an education and training infrastructure that offers access to quality education and training pathways to all Coloradans at all stages of life. The following recommendations and strategies aim to support the development of an education and training infrastructure in Colorado that provides family-sustaining careers at a positive Return On Investment (ROI) to all Coloradans no matter their background, zip code, or age. The recommendations and strategies aim to increase the variety and scale of high-quality education and training options, eliminate barriers to accessing these options, and support the development of locally designed and driven strategies to meet local workforce needs. They also include steps to prioritize the growth of a workforce to support in-demand jobs in the state.

## 1 RECOMMENDATION 1:

**Expand and improve lifelong pathways to career opportunities and economic mobility for everyone in Colorado, no matter their age, background, or zip code.**

### STRATEGY 1:

**Provide all learners a meaningful ability to evaluate the quality of education and training opportunities based on evidence that the opportunity supports economic mobility and sustained employment.**

- Evaluate educational and training options based on: program cost and length, enrollment demographics, program completion rates, job placement rates, starting wages for program completers, and sustained employment.<sup>13</sup>
- Create an easy-to-use, publicly available, collaborative system that designates which learning opportunities are proven to provide economic mobility and sustained employment to learners throughout the state of Colorado.

### STRATEGY 2:

**Provide access to a variety of learning opportunities proven to support livable wages and economic mobility for every age group and in every region of the state.**

- Change state and federal funding mechanisms to prioritize education and training opportunities that are proven to support economic mobility and sustained employment.
- Continue to expand access to affordable and high-quality childcare, preschool, and early childhood education, from birth, to all children and parents in the community where they live.

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<sup>13</sup> In 2018, Colorado passed HB18-1226, a bill for [Higher Education Review Degree Program Costs and Outcomes](#). The bill directed the Colorado Department of Higher Education to publish an annual return on investment (ROI) report for higher education institutions in the state. The 2023 Higher Education ROI report can be found [here](#).



- Ensure, through adequate funding and quality programming, that all pre-K-12 schools (public, charter, and private) in Colorado provide all students the opportunity to meet or exceed Colorado’s academic standards.
- Enable and encourage every learner in Colorado the opportunity to graduate high school with a diploma and an industry recognized credential.
- Ensure all programs provide learners with the ability to earn recognized and transferable credits and credentials.
- Allow learners as much transparency, flexibility, stackability, and portability as possible in selecting the education or training option that best prepares them to reach their future goals.
- Strengthen the full expanse and funding of the earn-and-learn ecosystem (boot camps, traditional Apprenticeships, Apprenticeship Degrees, residencies, etc.) to enable under resourced learners to afford access to postsecondary skill development and credentials of value through grants, stipends, and other financial aids.<sup>14</sup>
- Create opportunities for all learners to earn short-term credentials and/or participate in registered apprenticeships that create postsecondary pathways that are valuable, affordable, portable, and permeable, and lead to short- and long-term economic mobility.

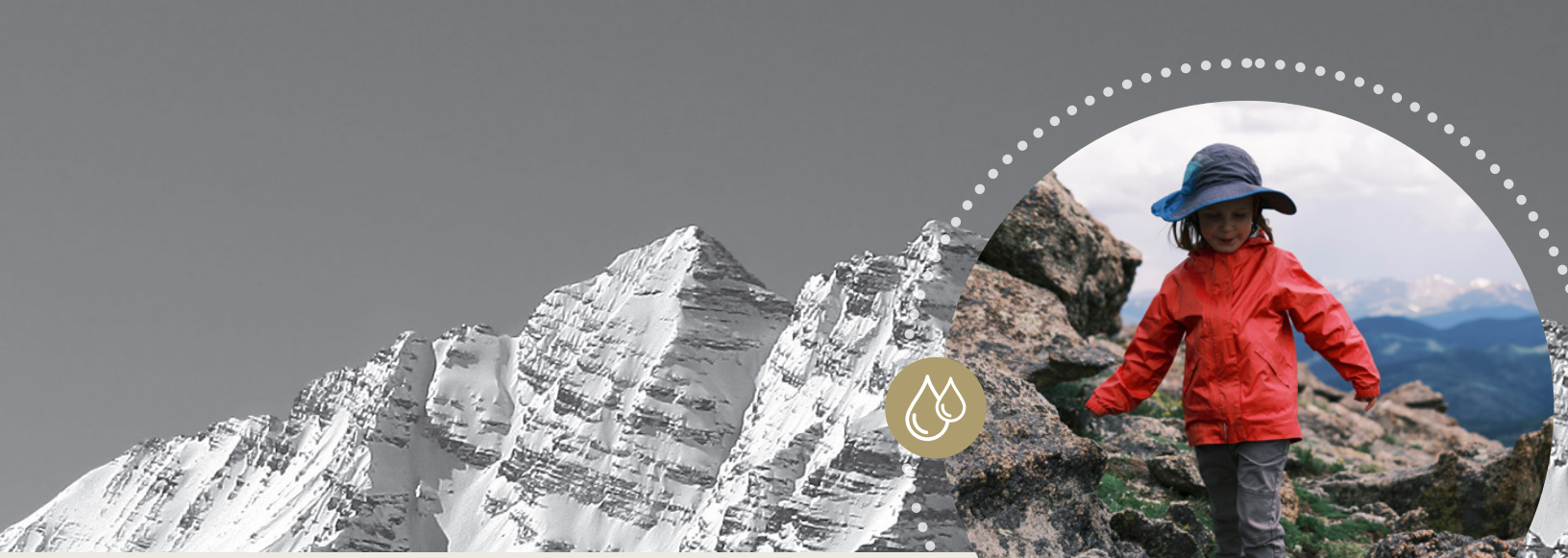
## HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESS

### ActivateWork

**ActivateWork** is a bridge between companies and a diverse pool of job seekers. The organization focuses on unemployed or underemployed workers (median age 30-35) and about two-thirds of training participants lack a bachelor’s degree. The organization provides a 15-week training program in software, engineering, security fundamentals, IT, and other options. All are free to learners. So far 214 students have completed the program. The group is on pace to train 650 learners over the next three years. Graduates see an average annual wage gain from \$20,000 to \$46,000.



<sup>14</sup> In June 2023, OEDIT released the first round of grants through the [Opportunity Now Colorado](#) grant program. The purpose of the grants is to support the creation and expansion of innovative workforce and talent development initiatives across the state.



## HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESS

### Collaboration to Support the Outdoor Economy

**Colorado's Outdoor Strategy:** Colorado's Outdoor Strategy is a regionally rooted, statewide vision and action plan for conservation, recreation, and climate resilience. The effort is being convened by Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO), Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), Colorado Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the Colorado Governor's Office. "Through this process, partners aim to balance state-level leadership and guidance with regional perspectives, ensuring the plan's relevance to the unique needs, opportunities, experiences, and cultures of local communities across Colorado from the Western Slope to the Eastern Plains. The effort will integrate existing plans and local statewide efforts, including those by Colorado's outdoor regional partnerships, as well as identify funding mechanisms to ensure action and outcomes."

**Colorado Outdoor Regional Partnerships Initiative:** The Regional Partnership Initiative (RPI) coalesces a network of local conservation and recreation efforts, known as Regional Partnerships, across Colorado to learn from and elevate community-level perspectives, values, and priorities, which subsequently inform work across the state. Some of these coalitions existed before the RPI, while others have come into being through a collaborative grant program. As of late 2023, 14 Regional Partnerships cover 51% of Colorado's geographic area. Each Regional Partnership considers multidisciplinary interests, including tourism, recreation, wildlife, equitable access to nature, water quality, habitat health, cultural resources, and more.



### **STRATEGY 3:**

#### **Remove systemic barriers to education and training opportunities, economic mobility, and career growth.**

- Identify learning, education, and training gaps and develop and use strategies across industry sectors proven to close those gaps, especially for populations and regions of the state that have been left behind.
- Create a central clearinghouse of best practices and tools proven to close opportunity gaps.
- Leverage multiple instructional delivery options and allow flexibility for communities and institutions to determine which delivery models work best for them.
- Develop a flexible funding model that allows schools to tailor programs to meet the needs of their learners, and update it periodically as technology changes.
- Understand and address the barriers that adult learners face (forgone wages, program cost, childcare, transportation, etc.) as they seek to upskill and work to remove those barriers to the degree possible.
- Reduce the cost of post-secondary education and training.
- Invest in well-qualified navigators, and guided education and training opportunities, to support education, training and career growth.

### **STRATEGY 4:**

#### **Prioritize local design of career pathways in partnership with local leadership that aligns with local needs.**

- Develop cross-sector partnerships between post-secondary education and training, K-12 school districts, business, and civic leaders to provide more opportunities for locally-led and regionally-relevant, work-based learning opportunities.
- Include flexibility to use resources to pay for transportation and other supportive costs for learners.

### **STRATEGY 5:**

#### **Convene the public and private sectors in an effort to provide an infrastructure of community support for learners and their families.**

- Prioritize learning models that emphasize parent engagement and provide wraparound support for learners who need it.
- Create meaningful access to mental health services for every learner in Colorado.
- Consider extending the school day to reflect the hours of working parents.

# 2

## RECOMMENDATION 2:

Engage the private sector as a partner in providing and expanding work-based learning opportunities.

### STRATEGY 1:

**Align evidenced-based education and training pathways with business needs for careers that are in-demand now and that will be in-demand in the future.**

- Bolster Colorado business community efforts to invest in the startup and scale of work-based learning opportunities across Colorado that align with industry needs.
- Grow collaboration and partnership between state agencies, high schools, post-secondary programs, and industry on development of training and career pathways and work-based learning opportunities.
- Expand potential for industry residencies on college campuses.
- Review and streamline policies that enable industry credentials to count for high school graduation.

### STRATEGY 2:

**Make it as easy as possible for employers across the state to provide and scale work-based learning opportunities to employees.**

- Create a one-stop-shop for Colorado industry, learners, and educators to access information about post-secondary program quality, funding, and job opportunities.
- Building off of successful models, streamline and simplify the design principles and proven practices employers need to implement high-quality work-based learning programs.
- Offer creative financial incentives that help small businesses create work-based learning opportunities.

# 3

## RECOMMENDATION 3:

Prioritize training for a workforce that will enable us to fill in-demand jobs<sup>15</sup>.

### STRATEGY 1:

**Make it easier to work in critical industries like nursing, mental health, teaching, and childcare.**

- Reduce barriers to obtaining the credentials and licenses necessary to work in critical industries.
- Reduce costs for workers to attend and receive training in these industries.
- Consider policy proposals that would enable workers in critical industries to earn a post-secondary credential, begin a livable wage career, and advance economically.

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<sup>15</sup> According to the 2023 Talent Pipeline Report, the most in-demand fields (that also support a living wage) are in the following industries: education and training, health care, science, engineering, computer science, installation and maintenance, business and financial operations, construction and extraction, community and social service occupations, and transportation and material movement. [[2023 Talent Pipeline Report](#)]

## STRATEGY 2:

### Continue to expand expedited pathways in all in-demand industries.

- Continue to expand affordable broadband access across the state.
- Incentivize employers to provide upskilling, training, and credentialing to employees to develop a skilled workforce.
- Expand work-based learning opportunities, short-term credentials, and other options that allow potential employees to enter the job market as soon as possible.

## STRATEGY 3:

### Prioritize pathways, partnerships, and new learning opportunities for the workforce needed to meet our sustainability objectives.

- Leverage federal funding to expand training opportunities for workers in jobs related to sustainability and resilience.
- Support the training of skilled professionals in energy, including electricians, HVAC contractors, energy technology innovators, and scientists.
- Support the training of skilled professionals needed to update our infrastructure and build resilience including foresters, water engineers, and firefighters.
- Support the training of skilled professionals to support efficient housing and commercial buildings including construction workers, plumbers, and electricians.

## HIGHLIGHTING SUCCESS

### Colorado Succeeds

Organizations like **Colorado Succeeds** have been working to advance the ability to establish and implement programs and strategies to improve Colorado's education and workforce outcomes. In 2023 alone, Colorado Succeeds connected over 20,000 high school students in more than 60 rural school districts to 1,000 local businesses and community partners through the Homegrown Talent Initiative. The organization also aided roughly 50 education and business entities in applying for over \$8 million in state and federal funding. Additionally, the organization was instrumental in launching the Education to Employment Alliance, in partnership with the Colorado Chamber of Commerce, Colorado Inclusive Economy, Colorado Technology Association, and Colorado Thrives, which aims to improve postsecondary workforce development programs.



# COST OF LIVING

The prosperity of people all over Colorado, and our state's ability to attract the workforce our businesses need depends on attaining an affordable cost of living for people throughout the state. This section includes recommendations and strategies intended to ensure a Cost of Living that is affordable to Coloradans at every income level. It includes recommendations and strategies intended to increase our affordable and attainable housing supply, reduce the cost of care for children and aging adults, expand affordable access to health care and mental health, and cut transportation costs.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1:**

**Increase housing supply and capacity to meet the diverse needs of Colorado's communities across all aspects of the housing continuum and stabilize the market.**

### **STRATEGY 1:**

**Advance local planning and regional collaboration towards statewide strategic growth.**

- Support local and regional Housing Needs Assessments (HNAs) through access to financial support, state demographic data, staffing, and technical support that enable the assessments to be completed quickly and consistently across the state.
- Encourage local or regional housing strategies to include documentation of regional infrastructure, transportation, and transit needs to support the Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) objectives, especially in places where infrastructure limitations are a barrier to new construction.
- Support local and regional strategic working groups to coordinate and mobilize implementation of action items identified in the Housing Needs Assessments (HNAs).
- Incentivize local development and community efforts that make progress towards statewide strategic growth goals such as water-wise development, energy efficiency, broadband access, increased density, and expanded transit.
- Partner with Colorado higher education institutions to train more people to perform quality Housing Needs Assessments (HNAs).

### **STRATEGY 2:**

**Build a statewide understanding of state housing needs and gaps.**

- Combine Housing Needs Assessments (HNAs) to create a central clearinghouse of data related to state housing needs and to elevate public awareness and understanding of the state's diverse housing needs.
- Encourage creation of state and regional asset maps and collaboration among public, private, and non-profit housing partners to elevate awareness of what products and services are available to support new housing and where gaps exist.
- Leverage dashboards and all efforts to show progress, flag emerging gaps, and elevate accountability towards a shared responsibility and collaborative and coordinated response among community members, local leaders, statewide partners, and stakeholders.

### **STRATEGY 3:**

#### **Increase housing inventory to meet the state’s diverse housing needs that exist across all aspects of the housing continuum – from homelessness to homeownership.**

- Support continued and strengthened investment in construction trades and affordable housing workforce development to better meet current and future market demands.
- Provide a central clearinghouse of best practices for zoning codes that enable the expansion of affordable and attainable housing in a variety of settings (urban, mountain, and rural) and markets.
- Expand funding and tax credits with demonstrated track record of enabling and increasing housing supply.<sup>16</sup>
- Expand state support of infrastructure and reduce fees for infrastructure (eg: water taps) that are needed to support new affordable housing projects.
- Increase funding for supportive services that provide wraparound services in conjunction with safe, decent, and affordable housing for the state’s most vulnerable residents including – seniors, those transitioning out of homelessness, those with mental illness, veterans, and individuals with disabilities.
- Support public policy changes to construction defects laws that balance the need for more affordable housing, particularly entry level/downsizing homeownership opportunities with the public safety.
- Advance housing industry innovation and greater access to capital to increase single family homeownership opportunities at affordable price-points including: modular/factory built housing construction, mass timber, Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs), community land trusts, rehabilitation of single-family housing stock.
- Advance efforts to rehabilitate and preserve safe, decent, and affordable housing stock including preservation of subsidized affordable housing at-risk of market rate conversion, and mobile home park reinvestment and preservation.

### **STRATEGY 4:**

#### **Strengthen community capacity to advance housing goals and access to affordable housing for every community.**

- Strengthen support for and regional collaboration among non-profit, for-profit, public housing authorities, and other community-based housing pillars that provide much needed local capacity, particularly in rural communities.
- Engage with diverse and trusted community partners to intentionally ensure the needs and perspectives of historically under-represented community members and equitable access to housing is a proactive part of Colorado’s housing strategy.
- Support increased access to financial education, homebuyer education, credit counseling, housing counseling, and eviction prevention services for consumers.
- Offer resources in multi-languages and with accessible access.

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<sup>16</sup> Since 2019, Colorado has invested over \$2.5 billion into Colorado’s housing needs. HB 19-1245 created the first ever state fund dedicated to affordable housing. In 2021, the General Assembly allocated one-time federal funding for housing through programs like the Innovative Affordable Housing Strategies program (HB21-1271), the Affordable Housing and Homeownership Cash Fund (HB 21-1329), and the Transformational Affordable Housing Grant and Strong Communities program (HB 22-1304). [\[Executive Order D 2023 014\]](#)

# 2

## RECOMMENDATION 2:

Build a statewide system ensuring access to affordable early childcare and development and care for aging adults.<sup>17</sup>

### STRATEGY 1:

Increase access to high-quality childcare and care for older adults across the state.

- Support innovative approaches to deliver high-quality childcare and care for aging adults in different environments that work for local communities.
- Provide flexibility for county governments and local childcare and aging adult providers to design programs that serve the local community.
- Expand support for providers offering high-quality childcare and care for aging adults at home, especially in rural areas.



### More Money for Local Government Efforts to Make Housing Affordable (Proposition 123)

Proposition 123 passed in 2022. The effort allocated \$300 million to affordable housing in Colorado. Sixty-percent of the funds allocated through Proposition 123 are dedicated to support local government efforts to purchase land and develop affordable housing. Local governments must opt into the funds and they must also pledge to increase their affordable housing stock. As of December 2023, more than 90% of Colorado’s population lives in a community that opted into the program, including Montrose County, Durango, Craig, Denver, Fort Lupton, and others. [[Colorado Sun, 1/2023](#)]

<sup>17</sup> In 2019, Colorado passed [HB19-1262](#) to establish full day kindergarten for all Colorado residents. In 2022, Colorado passed [HB22-1295](#) that provides every child in the year before they are eligible for kindergarten 15 hours of state-funded, voluntary preschool. Providers may choose to offer 10-hour programs. Three-year-olds who are low income or have qualifying factors are eligible for part-time (10 hours) of preschool programming



## **STRATEGY 2:**

**Continue to work towards making quality early childhood care and development affordable for all families.**

- Continue to expand public funding for education to include preschool and early childhood education throughout the state, especially for 0-3 year olds.

## **STRATEGY 3:**

**Make it easier to become a professional caregiver.**

- Incentivize public-private partnerships that enable caregivers to earn a competitive wage.
- Create no to low cost pathways for people to become licensed childcare and adult care providers.
- Ensure care economy workers have access to affordable housing and transportation.



**RECOMMENDATION 3:**

Enhance the prioritization of health care access and affordability.

**STRATEGY 1:**

Ensure all Coloradans have access to systems and supports that promote health and reduce risk factors, including:

- Access to healthy food, exercise, safe housing, and a clean environment;
- Access to preventive and primary care, including mental health, local doctors, and local pharmacies that provide services that prevent downstream cost;
- Quality hospitals, including private, frontier, government, and critical access hospitals where they are needed;
- Quality fetal and maternal care.

**STRATEGY 2:**

Develop systems of care that improve the cost-effectiveness of health care services by addressing the primary cost drivers.

- Continue to work with health care stakeholders to refine a strategy for more cost-effective prevention and management of chronic disease.
- Continue to use telehealth and other new technology to save money where possible so that the savings can be invested in essential in-person services like emergency responders and labor and delivery.
- Expand our system of long-term care services and support, including caregiving support for people who are able to age at home.

**STRATEGY 3:**

Reduce the per capita cost of health care by increasing prevention, quality, and access.

- Invest in public health as essential infrastructure (i.e., water, sewage, fire, police, broadband).
- Evaluate new financing mechanisms that capture and retain health care expenditure savings attributable to public investments in prevention, early intervention, wellness, and public health to sustain the public investments.
- Eliminate cost as a barrier to adequate health insurance coverage.
- Increase the proportion of total health care expenditures on preventive and primary care providers, services, and systems.

# 4

## **RECOMMENDATION 4:**

### **Prioritize mental health care and behavioral health care.**

#### **STRATEGY 1:**

##### **Expand Access to mental health care.**

- Collaborate with regional providers to expand access to mental health and addiction prevention and recovery services, particularly for children and adolescents, and share data on best practices statewide.<sup>18</sup>

#### **STRATEGY 2:**

##### **Fund standard substance abuse prevention curriculum in schools.**

- Implement and fund standard prevention curriculum for youth in schools to reduce long term mental health costs and promote wellness and resilience.
- Encourage participation in childhood substance abuse prevention programs for all k-12 schools across the state.
- Expand rehabilitation resources for youth who are currently experiencing substance abuse.

#### **STRATEGY 3:**

##### **Expand the availability of supportive housing that provides wraparound services, substance abuse counseling, and mental health services.**

- Support the development of housing initiatives at all levels of government that deploy wraparound services that are critical to maintaining both short term and long term housing.
- Develop workforce to provide on-site substance abuse and mental health care needs for short-term housing residents.
- Address the social determinants of health that influence the ability for Coloradans to secure long term housing.

#### **STRATEGY 4:**

##### **Invest in workforce development and early career training for future health care professionals.**

- Establish early training opportunities for prospective health care professionals.
- Continue to train health care professionals in on-site emergency behavioral and health care practices.

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<sup>18</sup> In 2022, Colorado used federal funds to start the “I Matter Program.” The program provided up to six free mental health sessions with a licensed provider and is open to all kids under 18.

**RECOMMENDATION 5:**

**Create a statewide strategy to cut the cost of transportation and vehicle miles traveled for Coloradans.**

**STRATEGY 1:**

**Work in partnership with Colorado’s urban, suburban, mountain, and rural communities to develop a strategy to reduce vehicle miles traveled, including consideration of:**

- Expansion of creative transportation options that bring down the costs of transportation to people living in all 64 counties;
- Expansion of statewide transit and rail;
- Expansion of access to public transit routes and frequency of delivery in areas of the state where the density supports or will support the total investment;
- Expansion of bike-pedestrian infrastructure and micro-mobility options; and
- Incentives for development that allow for residents to be in close proximity to job opportunities, housing, and family needs.

**STRATEGY 2:**

**Develop a long-term funding stream for transit<sup>19</sup> development that supports the development and operation of affordable transportation options across the state, that:**

- Builds off the federal investment in infrastructure and transit from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law;
- Minimizes the cost of transit for end-users;
- Protects funding for transportation corridors and options that are critical to economic success in rural communities where transit is not feasible; and
- Includes the consideration of separate competitive grant streams for local transit and infrastructure.

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<sup>19</sup> In 2021, Colorado passed SB21-260. The law dedicates \$5 billion over the next decade towards transportation infrastructure in Colorado.





# CONCLUSION

This framework outlines a sustainable and inclusive economic growth strategy for Colorado, with a view to building a better future for Colorado. It includes recommendations and strategies intended to: grow businesses and jobs in Colorado that close the wealth gap, increase median income for all Coloradans, and drive more access to prosperity in all Colorado communities; achieve quantifiable progress towards healthier and more resilient watersheds, forests, landscapes, rangelands, and working lands, even as our population grows; build lifelong learning pathways that provide family-sustaining careers at a positive Return on Investment (ROI) to all Coloradans no matter their background, zip code, or age; and ensure a Cost of Living that is affordable to every Coloradan.

The collaborators on this document came together because of a shared belief that successfully navigating the challenges facing Colorado's future depends on our ability to work together across geographies, across identities, and across issues.



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