Northwest Colorado
Council of Governments

# eNews

August 2026

## My Hometowns

As many of you know by now, summer travel is a reflective time for me. I'm reflecting on some of our most recent efforts and how they tie together. We held a productive Council Retreat to start August and will soon be budgeting for upcoming projects. Two study areas suggested at our Economic Summit include, 1.) updating our 2004 study on the economic impacts of Second Homes now that these part-time residents now occupy them at much higher rates, integrating into communities, changing expectations and social dynamics, and a 2.) more slippery subject on the other end– as many long-time families and leaders exit, what impact does that have on these small mountain towns?

We observe migration trends for our NWCCOG counties enough to see which counties draw people in their 20s, which retain them into their 30s. We observe the drop in school-age kids, lowering birth rate, the in-migration of those in their "third act." We also observe our communities building and building (and building) housing to retain workforce knowing that many people in their "first act" will choose to leave as they embark upon their "second act." We have reports tracking such trends and the forces at play which drive them, including our 2023 Workforce Housing Report which is due for an update in 2027.

Migration. Workforce. Housing. Economic Development. Demographics. These are technical terms we use that separate us from the humans behind the data points, which is why we occasionally look for anecdotal stories to encapsulate these trends. Young adults raised here often cannot afford to stay or return. Some of their parents are deciding they cannot afford to stay either. In the past few years, I've witnessed multiple generations of family re-locate to more affordable places. This is a poignant trend.

As a past Mayor, and perennial *connoisseur* of "place," I often focus on whether a town has "good bones" from a planning perspective, a coherent layout, parks, a downtown, other commercial centers, defined neighborhoods, clear edges like a national forest boundary, a hillside or a river. More difficult to observe are other indicators of a healthy community. Does it contain multiple generations? Are there a variety of

opportunities for employment or careers? And some uncomfortable measures, such as, how is the state of mental health of the inhabitants? Our Regional Landscape Report of Behavioral Health will be published within days, revealing a patchwork of behavioral health resources supported by dedicated champions across our region. This summer, for the [Regional Statistical Analysis Project] we interviewed community leaders to understand what they see when they look at their own communities?
What happens when those very leaders are the ones leaving the communities they dedicated considerable effort to improve? What does that say?

One version is the cashing-out story. Since COVID, those who owned homes prior have been able to recalibrate their retirement plans based on sudden equity. Another story is a market-based story, that gentrification is simply a force beyond our powers to counter. These are places with enviable quality of life that residents, once they gain a foothold, don't tend to exit on a whim.

Another emerging version is that in many towns on the periphery of resorts, who never defined as tourism-driven, in a single generation have been enveloped by forces beyond their powers such as the internet, remote work, and massive wealth that is unevenly distributed. It seems like a national story, but it isn't. We've consumed our own communities like an expendable commodity, destroying what we create like sandcastle at the seashore.

Judging the success of a community through a youth's eyes is a revealing exercise.
Forty years ago, I left a town I couldn't wait to leave. I was raised in Vancouver, Washington from $4^{th}$ grade through high school. It was neither a terrible, nor an inspiring place. Either way, like any place a child is raised, it left an imprint.

At the edge of vast forests beside the Columbia River, near the confluence of the Willamette River, Vancouver's location proves an ideal crossroads. It has for eons. Tug boats transport supply barges far inland through a series of dams, returning with grain to be shipped across the Pacific. A north-south coastal railroad and an east-west intercontinental railroad connect near the port moving new vehicles, lumber and thousands of containers, many now with Amazon logos. The Kaiser shipyards built 140 ships there during WWII. The Fort established by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1824 remains as a reminder that prospects for Vancouver were promising.

Why prosperity escapes Vancouver is a mystery. Homes in the first layers of town beyond the river, the core neighborhoods are neither historic nor grand. The downtown shows little sign that it was ever prosperous. The teardown, remodel craze that took over more valuable commercial centers and valuable neighborhoods across the country never happened here. As a result, block by block of homes, and buildings that house businesses remain as they were upon my high school graduation, in some cases with the very same businesses.

Since breaking from Vancouver, I've consciously sought places that felt different to me. I spent my working life in the Colorado mountain towns. The place I settled felt like the coherent, close community I that was missing where I was raised. I moved to Eagle, Colorado (for the purpose of this story could stand in for many other places touched by the golden finger of tourism). Someone who recently arrived would see it differently, while people who arrived around the time we did, 30 years ago or so increasingly express that they feel the community is now coming apart. These are upper middle-class people who spend lives in towns like ours who are beginning to believe that they can no longer afford to live in them. Vancouver kept its neighborhoods by never becoming valuable. My chosen region's community fabric is unravelling by becoming hyper-valuable. People from other places desire this lifestyle and can afford to purchase it. Increasingly, peers from my generation are cashing out. There are many motivations for this. One is the sense of being priced out of one's own neighborhood. Our Mountain Migration report in 2021 found that incoming individual migrants predominantly made over $150,000 per year while few locals made that much because very few jobs exist in resort towns that pay such wages. This is what happens when residents in a rural place are no longer bound by the limitations of the local economy. One solution is obvious. Home equity remains the primary generator of wealth, and become a necessary retirement tool for those of us who are not the 1%.

The pattern I was actually watching in Clark County is a predominant across America, which was abandon-and-sprawl across green fields. Our neighborhood filled in the 1970s, then the more ambitious families moved north and northeast chasing larger lots, newer schools and status. Commerce followed them. The county decided in 1977 that it needed a mall; then came Prairie, then Salmon Creek, then the next district with fresh asphalt and new schools. Storefronts lost their branding and kept the outline. Weeds grew in oversized parking lots, and then trees did. Forty years on, not a single visible improvement to the Hudson's Bay High School buildings, while ten new high schools went up to the north. Clark County had an infinite north, and every civic problem could be solved by not solving it. Indicative of that pattern, a couple exits up I-5 from the Columbia River in Hazel Dell, our grocery became a massive VHS rental.

Eagle, Colorado, where my wife and I landed, was a hundred-year-old cow town with a main street, a park, and good bones. That it was about to grow astronomically wasn't apparent to us, and neither was the thing that mattered more: the constraints. Forest, wilderness, floodplain, slope. Growth, when it came, was pushy and urgent, but it had to cohere, because there was nowhere to put the parts that didn't. Clark County's answer wasn't available here.

This August I am back to help care for my parents, in assisted living above a re-envisioned waterfront. Two blocks inland Vancouver looks revitalized — until I bike uptown at dawn. In the 63 blocks between the water and the street I grew up on, almost nothing has been torn down and modernized, because that takes land appreciation. Vehicles from the 1980s in the driveways. On some blocks only the trees have changed, Douglas firs and non-native sequoias now dwarf houses beside them. At sixteen I read those unchanged blocks as being left behind: the mossy siding, the tree over the roof, quiet poverty rather than a choice. Few homes are for sale. I ride past the ones that are, wondering whether we could afford to retire here.

In the Colorado valley towns, the Community Metrics project found that having arrived early and remained is the single largest determinant of whether the place still works for them — people renting, or who bought within the decade, don't feel economically stable. Timing was a game one could win or lose. In Vancouver, timing doesn't appear to matter much because the stakes are not so high, appreciation is not a barrier to entry. For all that, now that much of the buildable land to the north has been populated, in the core of town, people are not exiting in droves either. Reflecting on the past 30 years in Eagle, Colorado, as I approach retirement age, that stability takes on a new meaning - a kind of comfort and security that is just not possible for me or my family in Eagle.

This is not to say I'm convinced. In our region of Colorado, leaders are actively working to address the affordability problem and are making progress. I am not sure Vancouver ever named its problem. Fragmented governance and miles of buildable land to the north made the hard choices about community character avoidable. In Colorado we have named ours. A 2004 report documented the red-hot growth of mountain towns and the narrow window communities had to shape it. The 2021 Mountain Migration report showed wealthier remote workers, attached to faraway jobs, outcompeting local workers for rentals far down valley — many of them longtime visitors who simply stayed. The 2024 Community Metrics project put tourism and community on a continuum and measured the gap between the town residents have and the one they want; voters had already moved, shifting lodging-tax and short-term-rental revenue toward housing and childcare rather than promotion. Our 2026 Regional Statistical Analysis Project is the unsettling one: asked whether quality of life is improving, 16 percent said yes, 24 percent said it was declining, and the largest group, 42 percent, said both at once. Communities are getting physically better and economically harder to live in at the same time, and which one you experience depends largely on when you arrived and whether you own.

This gap between owners who may need to cash out, renters who cannot stay to build a life and those who can afford the place who may just be passing through, enjoying the amenities for a while seems to me like a potential community chasm. Unlike me who couldn't wait to leave Vancouver, my children talk of being able to one day return here and raise a family like we did. We remind them that this home is a major chunk of our retirement plan. We all know that selling means leaving.

I hear myself and think, what my children will think of growing up in Eagle County once they leave and realize that coming home is not possible? I wonder who will be the next committed leaders of this place.

Jon Stavney
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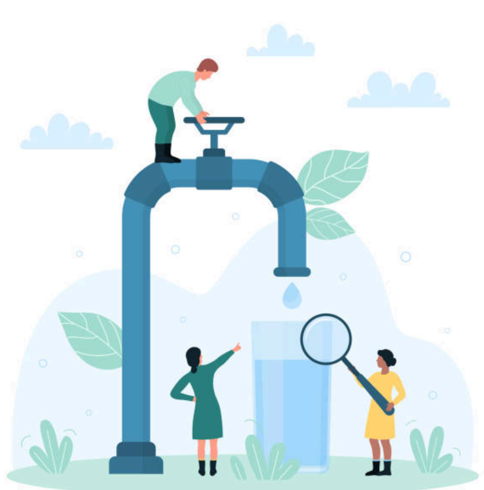
# Notice of Hearing:
# NWCCOG 208 Regional Water Quality Management Plan



Northwest Colorado Council of Governments will hold a public hearing to consider adopting a revised Regional Water Quality Management Plan ("208 Plan") pursuant to Sectio 208 of the Clean Water Act (33 U.S.C. 1288). The public hearing will be held on September 17, 2026 at 10 AM at the Eagle County Room at the County Building, 500 Broadway, Eagle, CO.

Interested persons are encouraged to provide comment. The draft 208 Plan is available at nwccog.org/programs/water-qualityquantity/watershed services or by contacting office@nwccog.org.

Interested persons may submit written comments to office@nwccog.org or may attend the hearing to provide oral comments on the proposed 208 Plan.

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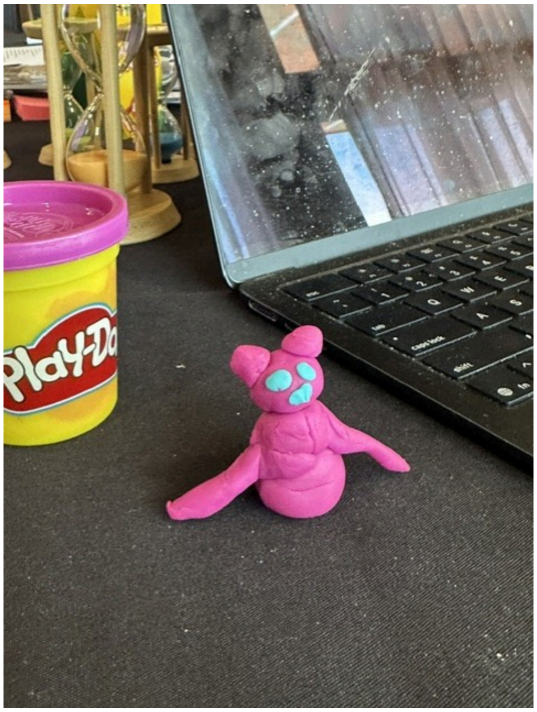
## Five Themes, One Region: Highlights from Our Annual Retreat




The August NWCCOG retreat brought Council members and program leaders together to reflect on a strong year and set direction for what's ahead. Conversations ranged from practical updates on how we run Council meetings to bigger-picture questions about our role as a regional convener and economic development partner. Below are the five key themes that emerged, along with some program highlights worth celebrating.

Five themes that emerged from the retreat:

**1. Improving Council Meetings** — by adopting a consent agenda for routine business, routing draft agendas to officers before the packet goes out (input on consent items, time durations, ordering, proposed presentations), keeping quick member updates, and adding periodic deeper-dive member spotlight presentations. *Ask of members: suggest presentation topics at the prior meeting.*

**2. Key Short-Term Action Items for the Executive Director** — Jon and staff are carrying several deliverables between now and fall:

- Publish and distribute the final Behavioral Health Landscape Assessment to members, interviewees, and stakeholders; GPS Consulting returns in September for presentation and feedback.
- Finalize the 2026–2031 CEDS — assemble comments, complete summary and framework sections mid-August, submit to EDA by September 1 to maintain Economic Development District status.
- Review and comment on the Colorado Broadband Office's draft middle-mile roadmap, continue Project THOR governance planning, and submit a letter to the incoming Governor on rural middle-mile investment.
- Synthesize retreat themes into a clearer set of near-term and medium-term choices to bring back to Council.

**3. Strengthening NWCCOG's Convener Role** — by piloting sub-regional, topic-driven meetings that surface local issues and feed them back to the full Council. The afternoon discussion landed on letting the subject matter define the group rather than starting from fixed geography, then determining who should be in the room. Sub-regional formats were also seen as a way to bring in communities like Jackson, North Park, and Grand more comfortably. Potential topics raised: airports/FAA/PUC, workforce, business roundtables, public engagement, and next-generation leadership.

**4. Demonstrating Value to Member Communities** — by developing program report cards and clearer impact summaries so members can see where shared services save local time and money. The recurring theme across the afternoon: attendance follows relevance. Members show up for regional topics, strong presenters, visible impact, and local subject-matter experts.

**5. Defining the Regional Economic Development Role** — Council and the Executive Committee were asked to give direction on scope and staffing: where ED staffing is missing across the region, what work could be regionalized or delegated to a regional ED role, whether cost-sharing models fit, and whether the program could grow entrepreneurially the way the Energy Program has. A survey of local ED stakeholders and business owners was suggested. *Ask of members: help surface ED and workforce gaps locally.*

**Program Highlights from the Retreat**

- Anita Cameron, Northwest Loan Fund — shared at the reception how adding Blaine Rhoden as Deputy Director allows the program to standardize processes and procedures while allowing her the opportunity to travel for a month this Fall!
- Erin Fisher, Vintage — shared at the reception how each member of her team has found ways to expand reach & impact, even as funding stagnates, her purpose-driven team excels.
- David Harris, Elevator Inspection Program — shared at the retreat how NWCCOG's program now covers nearly 2,400 elevators and conveyances and holds the highest compliance rate in the state — and that a replacement database and public interface is in development, bringing real-time searchable status, online payments, and online permit and test requests. Moving off paper checks has already cut administrative burden significantly.
- Doug Jones, Energy Program — shared at the retreat that the program has grown from roughly 8 employees serving about 100 clients a year to 30 employees serving more than 400, diversifying well beyond its original weatherization focus — and that Energy now operates the only BPI-accredited training and testing center on the Western Slope, and recently received workforce development funding to build curriculum and train staff and regional partners.
- Nate Walowitz, Broadband/Project THOR — spoke via video at the reception about how the network developed as a concept within the region and is now a model influencing the state middle mile plan.

Together, these themes point to a clear throughline: NWCCOG is at its best when we're responsive to what members actually need, whether that's a tighter meeting agenda, a sub-regional conversation on a topic that matters locally, or a clearer picture of the impact our shared programs deliver. Thank you to everyone who contributed ideas at the retreat — Jon and staff will be bringing these themes back to Council in the coming months as concrete proposals, and we'll keep you posted along the way. In the meantime, congratulations to our program teams on a year of real growth and impact!

## Upcoming Board Meetings

**Thursday, September 17, 2026** – Steamboat Springs/Routt County (Location TBD)
Full Council & EDD Board Annual Planning Meeting Primary
Agenda Items: Approve August 2026 meeting minutes, strategic planning for 2027; EDD Board meeting