

Mid-Columbia Economic Development District

MID-COLUMBIA COVID-19 ECONOMIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT

April 2021



Images MCEDD



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This economic needs assessment report was prepared by:

RARE Program Member/MCEDD Staff

Jane Allen | RARE Member

Other support provided by:

RARE Program

Titus Tomlinson | RARE Program Director

RARE Members in other Economic Development Districts: Chantal Ivenso (North East Oregon Economic Development District), Bree Cubrilovic (Greater Eastern Oregon Development Corporation), Ciara Williams (Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council), Alison Smith (South Central Oregon Economic Development District), and Janelle Polcyn (CCD Business Development Corporation)

University of Oregon Institute for Policy Research and Engagement

Robert Parker | Director of Strategic and Technical Solutions

Josh Bruce | Director of Applied Research and OPDR Director

Corum Ketchum | Graduate Research Associate

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Mid-Columbia Economic Resilience Core Team Members

Nate Stice | North Central Regional Solutions, Office of Governor Kate Brown

Greg Svelund | Oregon Department of Environmental Quality

Michael Held | Business Oregon

Lizzie Keenan | Hood Gorge Regional Destination Marketing Organization

Heather Ficht | East Cascades Workforce

Carrie Pipinich | Mid-Columbia Economic Development District

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Jarett Gilbert | Columbia Gorge Community College

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We thank you for your continued efforts to contribute to the economic development of the Mid-Columbia region.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community and business leaders throughout the Mid-Columbia region have seen the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic on their neighborhoods, organizations, and industries. Many have played critical roles in providing information, distributing PPE, and offering technical assistance to small businesses and their communities. Because of this, these leaders have a strong understanding of the challenges and opportunities that the region faces. To better understand what needs and opportunities exist, Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) conducted an economic needs assessment via interviews with a wide-variety of stakeholders in the Mid-Columbia region. This report summarizes what community and business leaders identified as top concerns and what resources might be mobilized to address both the short and long-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Key Needs Identified

- **Small Business Support:** Support small businesses as they recover and grow. Focus on those most impacted.
- **Critical Community Infrastructure:** Collaborate to expand broadband capacity, attainable housing for our workforce, and improved transportation networks.
- **Workforce Support:** Increase access to affordable, accessible childcare and workforce development initiatives that will help our residents get back to work and increase skills.
- **Regional Resilience:** Leverage the robust response to the pandemic to build resiliency planning networks to prepare businesses, organizations, and residents for future economic shocks and disruptions.

Opportunities

For each need identified, MCEDD has outlined potential opportunities for the region to begin addressing these challenges. While this report is limited in scope, the Mid-Columbia will continue to work together to understand the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and identify avenues for collaboration to move the region forward.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought immense challenges for the five county, bi-state Mid-Columbia region. Many small businesses shuttered their doors, with many more struggling to hang on. Federal and state relief has had a significant impact, but programs have often been difficult to navigate and do not replace regular revenues for small businesses that are employment drivers in the region.



Regional economic development partners, community leaders, and industry have all worked together to:

- share information and resources,
- provide trainings,
- support small businesses in accessing necessary capital through grant and loan programs,
- distribute personal protective equipment and other supplies, and
- collaborate to identify and address community needs.

While communities have found unique ways to adapt and respond to this crisis, a thoughtful economic recovery framework is needed. This approach will seek to minimize

the long-term impacts of the pandemic, connect residents and businesses to new opportunities, and create a more resilient regional economy moving forward. Utilizing a framework approach will support rapid adaptation to the quickly changing conditions that have characterized the pandemic for our communities and businesses.

To determine local needs and priorities for recovery, MCEDD conducted an economic needs assessment to better understand the impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic, existing challenges the region faces, and opportunities to come together for a strong recovery. This report covers what community leaders in the Mid-Columbia feel are the biggest challenges facing the region and what resources and strategies can be mobilized to address them in the future.

This report is not a comprehensive assessment. Due to timing and capacity, it is limited in scope and ultimately, there are many voices in the community that are not represented. MCEDD will continue to engage the public in the economic recovery process and throughout the major update of the region's comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS), which will take place over the next several months. The challenges identified in this process cannot be solved by a single entity alone – they will require collaboration, bold strategies, and thoughtful planning. This report concludes with a recovery framework outlining short-term actions. These areas of need will also be incorporated into the region's updated comprehensive economic development strategy (CEDS) when it is adopted in early 2022. MCEDD is committed to working with partners across the Mid-Columbia to support an equitable economy where all communities can thrive.

Background & Methods

This needs assessment was developed in partnership with six economic development districts across the State of Oregon with support from the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy, Research, and Engagement. To learn more about this partnership and collaboration, please see [Appendix A](#). The assessment process was developed in mid-December, with interviews occurring between the months of January and March. MCEDD conducted 17 interviews with 25 participants. Interviewees were chosen to reflect key industries and organizations that support economic and workforce development. A set of questions related to economic impacts from the pandemic, regional and local needs, and hopes for recovery were developed and distributed in advance of interviews. A list of questions can be found in [Appendix B](#). During the pandemic, MCEDD and Governor Brown's Regional Solutions Coordinator convened the Mid-Columbia Economic Resiliency Team (MCERT), a group of local, regional, and state partners from Oregon and Washington, to share information, identify resources and coordinate efforts regarding the COVID-19 pandemic economic response. The findings in this report build not only on the interviews noted above, but also the conversations had during these meetings.

The goal of this assessment was to apply a [“listen to learn”](#) framework to discover what community leaders feel are priority concerns and what actions will be needed to support an equitable recovery. This report summarizes those findings and makes recommendations for future action through existing and new partnerships.



Image Tim Mossholder

Guiding Principles

MCEDD's CEDS Steering Committee has identified two principles – equitable outcomes and resilience – to guide recovery and the new economic development strategy. Inherent in this is also a need to focus on a collaborative approach. These principles will lay the foundation for implementing a recovery framework focused on the needs identified in this assessment.



Equitable Outcomes

Underserved populations have been the most impacted by the pandemic. As the region charts a path towards recovery, prioritizing equitable access to opportunity, addressing barriers, and targeting resources and support based on the highest needs, will be crucial to securing positive economic outcomes for all communities.



Resilience

Resilience is defined as the ability to prevent, withstand, and recover from disruptions and extreme events. The Mid-Columbia region of Oregon and Washington has experienced many disasters in recent years, including wildfires and severe winter storms, that have negatively impacted the regional economy. These events have provided opportunities to begin building strategies to support a more resilient economy. Despite the region's history with these events, the pandemic has been unprecedented in its length, complexity, and scope, causing a record number of unemployment claims and many closed businesses. To better prepare the region for future disruptions and economic shocks, it is imperative that resilient principles are woven into the recovery and future planning processes.



Collaboration

Collaboration and partnership are some of the region's greatest assets and have contributed greatly to its ability to respond to both the current crisis and past events. The successful MCERT efforts are an example of the impact that coming together and leveraging diverse assets from partners can have in supporting the region. This strong foundation of networks throughout Mid-Columbia can be leveraged to address both the short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic and will lay the groundwork for coalition-building around deeper issues such as housing shortages and workforce development.

MCEDD's Role in Economic Development

The Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) is the only regional economic development entity that supports the Columbia Gorge region of Oregon and Washington. MCEDD was formed in 1969 for the purpose of providing access to economic development loans and grants, pooled technical assistance, marketing and administrative resources, and a regional approach to economic development efforts. These core functions are retained throughout the various services MCEDD provides to the region today. The organization is governed by a 21-member board representing its five member counties and their cities, ports, chambers, higher education, workforce and private industry.

Core Services for MCEDD include:

- **Business Assistance:** Operation of revolving loan funds to serve as a gap financier; business trainings.
- **Regional Coordination:** Developing a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, supporting industry cluster development, engaging in key strategy implementation that requires a regional approach including areas such as transportation and telecommunications.
- **Technical Assistance:** Support for our members in economic development and project development efforts. Grant writing and grant administration, with a focus on state and federally funded projects. Coordination with the Economic Development Administration.

DISTRICT PROFILE

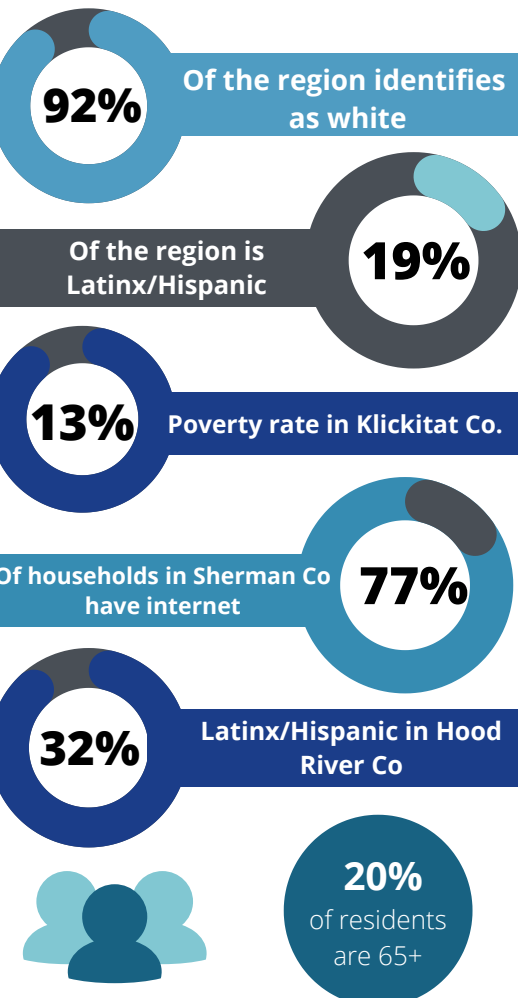
MCEDD is a bi-state regional government that supports economic development in its five-county region: Klickitat and Skamania Counties in Washington, and Hood River, Wasco, and Sherman Counties in Oregon. For the last 51 years, MCEDD has supported the region by promoting growth in family-wage jobs, diversification of the economic base, and retention of businesses.

Population	Wasco	Sherman	Hood River	Klickitat	Skamania	MCEDD Total
2019	26,682	1,780	23,382	22,425	12,083	86,352
2010	25,213	1,765	22,346	20,318	11,066	80,708
Change						
Percent	5.5%	.8%	4.4%	9.4%	8.4%	6.5%
Housing Units						
2019	11,773	943	10,157	10,667	5,992	41,551
2010	11,487	918	9,271	9,786	5,628	39,100
Percent	2.4%	2.7%	8.7%	8.3%	6.1%	5.9%

The Mid-Columbia region spans the Columbia River and encompasses a large portion of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, which creates unique opportunities and challenges for land use, business development, and the tourism and recreation industries. The region constitutes an area of 7,289 square miles with a population of about 85,672 as of 2020 for the five-county region. Figure 1 shows that all counties, have shown growth, although at different levels.

Figure 1: Population growth by county. Data: University of Oregon's Institute for Policy, Research, and Engagement.

Demographics



Tribes of the Columbia River Gorge

The Columbia River Gorge has been an important fishing and trading area for the Native American Tribes in the region for thousands of years.

There are four tribes that hold rights to access the Columbia River for fishing:

The Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs, Yakama Nation, Nez Perce Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of Umatilla Indian Reservation.

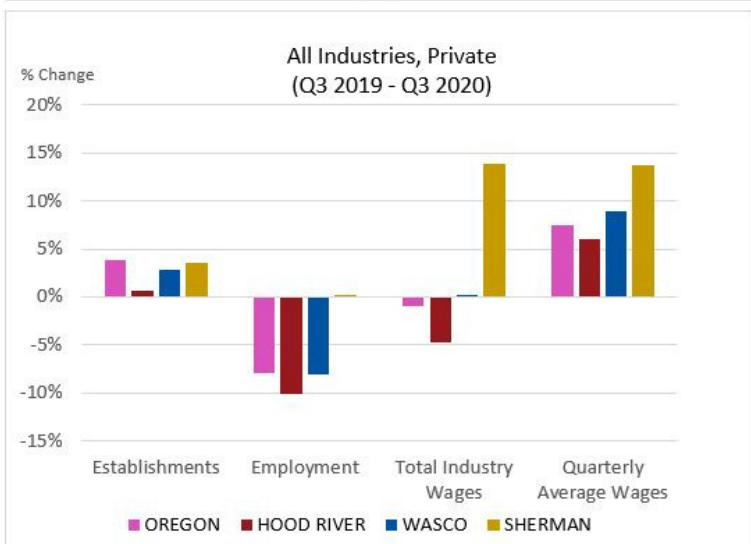
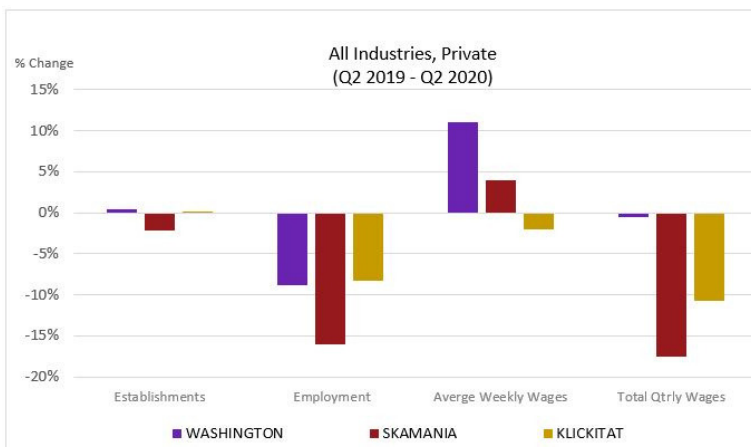
TRIBAL LANDS

The Yakama Nation and Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs have tribal lands in Mid-Columbia region, but all four tribes have strong connections to the river and collectively use and manage in-lieu fishing sites located along the Columbia River.



**Data from U.S. Census Bureau*

Economic Impacts From COVID-19



Figures 2 & 3: Percent change in employment, wages, and establishments for all industries in Mid-Columbia. Data: University of Oregon's Institute for Policy, Research, and Engagement.

Key Industries

The region boasts six key industry sectors identified in the current (2017–2022) CEDS: high-tech, manufacturing with a focus on fermentation science and value-added agriculture, healthcare, renewable energy, forest products, and arts, culture, tourism, and recreation. Many of these industries have been impacted by the pandemic, with tourism, hospitality, and healthcare industries being the hardest hit. For a closer look at these industries and their impacts, please see [Appendix C](#). This report will briefly look at these significantly impacted industries and some key recovery strategies identified through industry sector interviews. For a more in-depth report about the region and background on key industry clusters, please review the [CEDS](#).

Job and wage losses experienced in the region during the pandemic were immediate and extensive. Data year over year from March–June of 2019 and 2020 for Klickitat and Skamania counties shows job loss of 8% and 16% respectively (Figure 2). Trends on the region's three Oregon counties were consistent with that of their Washington counterparts.

Hood River, and Wasco counties saw job losses of 10% and 8% respectively, while Sherman County saw a slight increase in employment from Q3 2019 to Q3 2020 (Figure 3). However, average quarterly wages increased in the Oregon counties and the number of firms in the region stayed constant or increased modestly. This data analysis by researchers at the University of Oregon points to limited long-term economic impacts and opportunity for a strong economic recovery overall for the region.

HOSPITALITY & TOURISM

The pandemic, coupled with recent wildfires in the region, created unprecedented challenges for hospitality and tourism industries. Business Oregon, Travel Oregon, and Oregon's Small Business Development Center Network developed a [survey](#) early in the pandemic to identify the most impacted industries. Survey results show accommodation, entertainment, recreation, and restaurant businesses faced the largest revenue declines. The study also found that minority and women-owned businesses across all sectors surveyed had the steepest revenue change compared to 2019. Additionally, findings show that rural counties in Oregon experienced more business closures than their urban counterparts. Data from Travel Oregon's tourism stakeholder [survey](#) distributed in October of 2020, found that 44% of businesses surveyed in the Gorge had to lay off or terminate their employees due to COVID-19. The timeliness of information on operational guidance and changing levels of closure for tourism businesses created a challenge. Interviewees commented that there was complexity on all levels – from funding, regulations, and public health concerns – that made it difficult for these businesses to navigate the pandemic.

Tourism representatives shared that the pandemic shined a light on the value of tourism when small businesses in the region had a difficult time staying afloat with only local revenue. While the pandemic created many challenges for tourism and recreation, there were some positive impacts. The pandemic allowed for system changes to address overcrowding issues – which normally would require lengthy environmental and regulatory review – to happen on a quicker timeline to meet public health requirements. For example, the US Forest Service and Oregon Department of Transportation implemented a Multnomah Falls ticketing system, where visitors were required to reserve a timed ticket to view the Falls and the Historic Lodge. This location brings an estimated two million people to the Scenic Area every year. These approaches could provide lessons learned for scaling strategies to address capacity issues in other areas during the summer months, when visitation to the Gorge is at its highest.

Tourism & Hospitality Recovery Strategies

The following are insights shared from interviewees on potential recovery strategies for the tourism and hospitality industries.

- Promote activities that bring economic benefits from tourism to local communities in the region.
- Plan with local communities to support safely continuing the reopening process with increased tourism, especially during the peak season.
- Work directly with interested communities to bring tourism to areas less traveled through marketing and outreach campaigns.
- Enhance efforts among regional partners to promote business preparedness and resiliency planning with a focus on this sector.
- Create pathways for training employees to meet industry needs.
- Affordable housing is needed for low-to moderate income families to retain this workforce.

AGRICULTURE

Another industry that has been greatly impacted by the pandemic is agriculture. Key crops for the region include cherries, pears, wheat, wine grapes, and cattle. The uncertainty that surrounded the beginning of the pandemic made it difficult for local farmers to plan for the 2020 season, especially as regulations were being developed during the lead up to harvest for earlier crops. Additionally, for smaller farming operations that rely heavily on direct-to-consumer markets and local restaurants – an industry that saw steep declines due to COVID-19 – there was significant uncertainty. Coupled with the pandemic, farmers in the Pacific Northwest also dealt with an extreme fire season in 2020. While there were no major fires that destroyed significant crops in Mid-Columbia during the 2020 season, smoke traveling from wildfires nearby impacted worker safety and could impact wine grape production with smoke taint.

Agricultural Workforce

A significant portion of local agriculture focused on fruit production relies on migrant seasonal labor. Multiple stakeholders noted that farmworkers faced increased risks due to the challenges of COVID-19 and that it was difficult to provide adequate housing where workers were able to socially distance. COVID-19 restrictions resulted in a large reduction in agricultural labor housing unit capacity. As workers were supported elsewhere, finding transportation to and from production sites as well as adequate access to cooking facilities proved difficult. Interviewees commented that communication between healthcare workers and migrant farmworkers was also challenging. However, regional partners had some successes with implementing on-site internet access for telehealth and other services, regular testing events, and training for both orchardists and packing houses on best practices in operations during COVID-19.

Agriculture Recovery Strategies

The following are insights shared from interviewees on potential recovery strategies for the agriculture industry.

- Increase access to technical assistance and training for farming operations to develop business, succession, or transition plans.
- Fund agencies like Extension, Natural Resource Conservation Service, USDA's Farm Service Agency, and Soil and Water Conservation Districts so they have the capacity to serve local farmers in key sectors of the industry with capital and training.
- Support sector diversification where appropriate by helping growers develop value-added agricultural products, agritourism opportunities, and direct-to-consumer strategies compatible with our major crops.
- Support local food organizations as they work to create a robust and resilient local food system that can support residents if access to the region is delayed by severe weather or extreme events.
- Support community-based organizations working to connect migrant seasonal farmworkers and farmers to services and programs.
- Increased broadband access for rural communities.

HEALTHCARE

The pandemic created many challenges for healthcare providers in the region. Early in the pandemic, healthcare clinics had to stop elective procedures, which caused significant financial losses only partially filled by federal relief. Even after elective surgeries became available, health concerns about contracting COVID-19 while visiting the hospital caused many residents to go without necessary medical care, creating potential long-term health impacts for residents while continuing reduced revenue for the industry. Additionally, supply chain disruptions and capacity issues have created further challenges with operations as many rely on “just in time” supply shipments because they are less costly. This practice made securing necessary supplies and PPE difficult. In Spring of 2021, administering vaccines proves to be a considerable resource and financial burden for local hospitals as well.

The pandemic also changed the landscape for telehealth services. State and federal regulators waived regulations and insurance companies were reimbursing at regular rates for telehealth programs during initial phases of the pandemic to accommodate safe patients visits. It is likely that insurance will continue to cover telemedicine in the future but reimbursements are already shifting. Access to telemedicine can increase access to healthcare, especially for those who live in remote areas. However, many who live in rural areas do not have the broadband needed to benefit from this kind of care.

Healthcare Recovery Strategies

The following are insights shared from interviewees on potential recovery strategies for the healthcare industry.

- Increase resources for rural healthcare centers to better serve communities.
- Increase broadband access for rural communities so they can access telehealth services.
- Affordable housing is needed for low-to moderate income families to retain this workforce.

Other Industries

It is important to note, some industries have weathered the pandemic better than others. Key industries in the region such as high-tech, forest products, and renewable energy have had fewer negative impacts, and in some cases, have been able to take advantage of opportunities to grow. Some companies in the region were also able to shift production to meet key supply needs during the beginning of the pandemic as supply chains adapted to accommodate the increased need for PPE and other necessities like hand sanitizer as well.

KEY NEEDS

The following section outlines key needs along with potential opportunities to address them. These needs have been aggregated, meaning this section highlights those issues brought up most as priorities to help the region build a more robust, resilient economy coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic. Identifying and building on opportunities around these challenges will be a collaborative effort with existing and new partners from around the region as well as those at the state and federal levels. Recent crises such as the pandemic and wildfires have proved that when the region works together, it can cultivate bold strategies to tackle challenging issues.



Image Jeriden Villegas

SMALL BUSINESS SUPPORT

KEY NEED | TARGETED SUPPORT FOR SMALL BUSINESSES

While some businesses benefitted from relief funding, there is still a long way to go before small businesses in our communities become whole again. The economic relief loans such as Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) were difficult to navigate, and often were not accessible to populations most impacted either because they did not qualify, or the application process was too burdensome. The food and beverage, tourism, entertainment, and retail industries were hit particularly hard and are still struggling to recover from record economic losses.

DATA

Oregon*

- From March to April of 2020, Oregon lost 285,000 nonfarm payroll jobs (-14.5%). For comparison, during the Great Recession, Oregon lost roughly 150,000 jobs on net over the course of a few years.
- Oregon has currently only recovered 37% of its losses.
- Wasco County experienced an annual average job loss of about -5.8% in 2020. In Hood River County, annual average job loss was about -10.7%.
- In Sherman County, the annual average job loss was -7.6%.
- The hardest hit sectors in Oregon were leisure and hospitality, education and health services, and government.
- Over \$61.8 million in unemployment benefits was paid over April 2020 to January 2021 in Hood River and Wasco Counties.

**Data from Oregon economist Dallas Fridley*

Washington*

- Washington state lost half a million jobs in April 2020 and the rate of job losses early on in the pandemic eclipsed those of the 2008-2009 recession.
- In Klickitat County, annual job loss was 6% from December 2019-December 2020.
- In Skamania County job loss for the same period was nearly 12%. The greatest impacted sectors were leisure and hospitality, accommodation and food services, and K-12 education.
- In Skamania and Klickitat Counties, \$41.2 million in unemployment benefits was paid over April 2020 to February 2021.

**Data from Washington economist Scott Bailey*

Opportunities

- Identify and implement targeted support strategies for businesses with less capacity or those hardest hit.
- Continue to partner with organizations like the SBDC, local chambers of commerce, and community or industry groups to provide trainings and informational webinars that are relevant, address gaps, and contribute to improving business resilience.
- Partner with organizations such as The Next Door, Inc. and the SBDC to offer Spanish language business trainings and targeted support for Latinx communities.
- Work with local businesses to support accessing resources through the American Rescue Plan and other monies targeted for small business initiatives.

CRITICAL COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

KEY NEED | HOUSING

Meeting needs for attainable housing means that residents of all income levels have access to adequate housing and that housing options are within a reasonable commuting distance to support the local workforce. Costs for homes and rentals have risen faster than wages, increasing the affordability gap for residents. It is becoming more challenging for people to live and work in the Mid-Columbia region, impacting local business' ability to attract and maintain the necessary workforce to operate today. While housing has been a long-standing issue for the region, the pandemic seems to have increased this trend. Additionally, because the market is so saturated, sellers give preference to the "best buyers" or those who can afford a large down payment or pay in cash. This excludes many potential buyers from the market. Interviewees also expressed concern about a lack of workforce to fill positions that support housing development, such as electricians and contractors.

DATA

- Data shows a decrease in median home price in 2020 in Sherman County, but this may be due to the smaller number of sales providing more opportunity to skew overall trends based on individual sales. Please see **Appendix D** for Mid-Columbia median home pricing data.
- According to data by [Redfin](#), homes across the U.S. are selling within a week or less of hitting the market.
- In March, annual housing price growth reached 17%, which is the highest rate since 2012. Factors impacting these trends include record low mortgage rates, pent up savings from a year of limited activity for some, and the increase in remote-work opportunities.
- Telecommuting allows the workforce to be more flexible with where they choose to live and is resulting in the emergence of "[zoom towns](#)" which has created additional pressure on housing prices.
- Anecdotally, regional real estate professionals have indicated that this is impacting our market as well.

Opportunities

- Support interested communities in accessing resources and best practices for reducing barriers to housing development through tools such as code updates, infrastructure investments, financing tools, and incentives.
- Support opportunities to increase affordable housing for our most vulnerable populations through key partners like Mid-Columbia Housing Authority, Columbia Cascade Housing Corp, Washington Gorge Action Council, Mid-Columbia Community Action Council, developers, and local banks.
- Increase access to resources to reduce the cost burden of housing through higher utilization of energy efficiency incentives currently available.
- Create or distribute information on resources for energy efficiency, housing development incentive programs, and other opportunities for housing investment in the region.
- Support training opportunities to address workforce gaps in construction, including skilled contractors, electricians, plumbers, and other trades.

CRITICAL COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

KEY NEED | BROADBAND

Broadband has been a consistent challenge, particularly for more rural areas of the Mid-Columbia. As work, education, and services transitioned almost completely to virtual platforms during the pandemic, many communities lacking reliable, high speed internet suffered. Robust internet access is necessary for job growth and business retention. It is essential infrastructure that contributes to a community's long-term viability. As Oregon Broadband Advisory Council stated in their most recent [report](#), "Broadband is now the lifeblood of economic development." Even where broadband access is more widespread, low-income residents and communities of color are often at a disadvantage when transitioning to virtual platforms, as they may not have access to the necessary technology and training to use it. If broadband accessibility is not addressed, the pandemic and its related impacts will only continue to worsen these existing inequalities.

DATA

Note: there are efforts underway to modernize the data noted below to more accurately reflect connectivity. This is what is currently available but it can understate gaps in service.

- According to the [FCC](#), roughly 97% of Americans have access to high-speed internet in urban areas compared to only 65% in rural areas.
- On tribal lands, less than 60% have access to adequate broadband.
- 54% of all census blocks in Oregon have basic broadband access, largely reflecting the rural-urban digital divide.
- According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#) about 13.5% of Washington state residents did not have broadband access in 2018. This was mostly in low-income or rural areas.

Opportunities

- Leverage models working in the region already to expand broadband access into rural areas, including public/private partnerships, open access networks, and electric co-ops or people's utility districts interested in supporting broadband infrastructure.
- Invest in scalable technology to meet needs now and set our communities up for continued growth in broadband requirements for daily life and economic activity.
- Explore resources related to more widespread key uses (e.g., distance learning, telemedicine, remote working, smart infrastructure) to support projects.
- Continue to share information and resources through the Gorge Broadband Consortium and leverage this collaborative to support action.

CRITICAL COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE

KEY NEED | TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

The Mid-Columbia region is a significant transportation corridor and is uniquely positioned to do business with a wide range of markets due to its central location. Transportation throughout the region, however, can be a challenge. Disruptions to passenger and freight vehicles are common during extreme events such as severe winter storms and wildfires. Congestion at key tourism destinations throughout the region creates safety concerns. Ageing infrastructure is a major vulnerability.

DATA

- According to [ODOT](#), vehicle traffic has grown steadily on I-84 and on the Historic Columbia River Highway within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area.
- Traffic volumes along the Historic Columbia River Highway during the summer months are three to four times higher than in the winter months.

Opportunities

- Leverage increased coordination between state agencies like WA Department of Natural Resources, Oregon and Washington Parks and Recreation Department, U.S. Forest Service, OR and WA Departments of Transportation, Columbia Gorge Tourism Alliance, and local jurisdictions and law enforcement to develop long-term strategies to address capacity, safety, and infrastructure concerns.
- Identify potential funding sources to support shovel-ready projects.
- Continue to work with partners to support the Gorge Regional Transit Strategy, a plan to establish a comprehensive transit strategy for the five-county region that improves transportation networks and workforce mobility, enhances visitor experiences, increases access to services, addresses congestion and parking concerns, and supports traffic safety.
- Leverage the Gorge Translink Alliance, a network of rural transportation providers offering services throughout the Columbia River Gorge, to improve access in rural areas.

WORKFORCE SUPPORT

KEY NEED | ACCESSIBLE CHILDCARE

As childcare providers were forced to close during the pandemic, many parents had to leave the workforce to take care of their children. However, access to childcare has been a growing issue in the region for some years. Lack of affordable, high-quality childcare primarily impacts low to moderate income residents and will have a significant effect on local workforce participation if not addressed.

DATA

- A study done by Four Rivers Early Learning Hub based in the Columbia Gorge found that between March and September nearly 60% of parents surveyed shared that they have had to miss work three times or more, and 25% of families said they needed to miss work 10 times or more due to a lack of available childcare.
- In 2018, The Center for American Progress issued a [report](#) that found that 90% of Oregon and much of Washington are in a “childcare desert”, or an area where there is only one childcare slot available for every three children who seek care.
- Nationally, an estimated four times as many women as compared to men, [dropped out of the labor force](#) in September of last year.
- Research shows that the childcare gap is greater in rural areas. A study by the [Bipartisan Policy Center](#) found that the childcare need in rural areas “exceeded supply by 35% compared to 29% in metropolitan areas.”

Opportunities

- Explore opportunities through the Community Development Block Grant program via the CARES Act to provide funding for childcare initiatives, such as supporting low to moderate income families with childcare needs or developing facilities that can provide a space for childcare programs to serve these populations.
- Both Columbia Gorge Community College and partners in Klickitat County are exploring feasibility of developing childcare centers. CGCC’s proposal would include workforce training opportunities. Engaging with these efforts and exploring the feasibility of these models for expanded center-based childcare options in the region could create another resource moving forward.
- Through the most recent stimulus package, families with small children will receive a monthly direct payment that could increase access to childcare for some populations if there are spots available. Support efforts to connect families with providers.
- Identify and explore successful models for addressing this issue, including employer-based childcare, center-based childcare, and others.
- Work to incorporate business planning into childcare training opportunities.

WORKFORCE SUPPORT

KEY NEED | WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Despite a record high of unemployment claims, there are currently a high number of job openings available in the Mid-Columbia region. This could be attributed to a variety of factors, including childcare availability, COVID-19 health risks, lack of attainable housing, and the negative perception of jobs in certain industries. The need for qualified workforce will greatly impact the region's ability to grow economically in the long-term.

DATA

- The National Federation of Independent Business reported that in March 2021, 42% of small businesses surveyed said they had jobs they could not fill. This is 20 points higher than the historical average of 22%.
- Data from the Labor Department in February showed job openings at a five-month high.
- Job openings on sites like Indeed and ZipRecruiter are back to pre-pandemic levels, but millions of jobs remain open. This is thought to be attributed to the types of jobs available, which are typically low-wage, and that many jobseekers are looking for remote work opportunities.
- Only 1 in 10 job postings on ZipRecruiter marketplace offers remote work as an option, according to a labor economist for the site.

Opportunities

- Continued partnership between Oregon and Washington workforce services to support seamless transitions into the workforce post-graduation or with career changes.
- Enhance opportunities for Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways and college credit tracks in high schools throughout the region.
- Support partnerships between industry, workforce organizations, and secondary and higher education to understand workforce gaps, tailor training programs accordingly, and expose students to potential career opportunities in the region.

REGIONAL RESILIENCE

KEY NEED | PLANNING AND PREPAREDNESS

The pandemic further highlighted how vulnerable the region is to economic shocks and disruptions. Over the past six years, the Mid-Columbia region has experienced multiple disasters such as wildfires, severe winter storms, flooding, and landslides. These events have damaged infrastructure and crops, disrupted business operations, caused temporary or permanent job displacement, and resulted in loss of revenue. Transportation networks such as the I-84/SR-14 corridor can be cut off during these types of events which can greatly reduce commerce as visitors, employees, and goods are unable to access or leave the region. These events can also be incredibly costly if businesses, organizations, and residents are not prepared. To withstand economic disruptions in the future, the region needs to take coordinated approaches at improving resilience through planning and preparedness.

DATA

- According to a report from [FEMA](#), 40% of businesses do not reopen after a disaster occurs and another 25% of businesses fail within one year.
- During the Eagle Creek Fire of 2017, many local businesses faced issues maintaining operations and experienced revenue loss.
- Food service and tourism related industries [reported](#) 50-60% year-over-year downturn during the fire.
- According to a stakeholder survey conducted by Travel Oregon, 54% of respondents from the Columbia Gorge region [reported](#) significant negative impacts from COVID-19 on their businesses or organizations revenue and 15% reported a significant impact from the 2020 wildfire season.

Opportunities

- Identify and improve communication networks between critical economic and community-based organizations and make planning and preparedness an ongoing, collaborative effort.
- Work directly with businesses to improve their planning for disruptive events, through industry specific trainings, resources, and incentives.
- Strengthen the capacity of local organizations that play an important role in sharing information and providing resources during emergencies such as local chambers of commerce and food banks.
- Invest in activities that support risk reduction and resilience efforts.
- Work with community organizations to provide culturally relevant trainings and ensure that resources are available in multiple languages.
- Identify trusted community leaders to take active roles in community preparedness and planning.

CONCLUSION

The pandemic highlighted a wide breadth of needs within the Mid-Columbia region, many of which were already challenges before this crisis. To ensure an economic recovery strategy that benefits all residents and communities, the region will need to continue to work collaboratively, invest in creative strategies to address issues, and be ready to access funding streams to implement these strategies. This overarching framework focused on small business assistance, resilient community infrastructure, supporting our workforce, and building on increased collaboration during the pandemic will help guide recovery efforts.

MCEDD is committed to working with local partners to implement this framework for recovery in the Mid-Columbia. MCEDD will also work with partner districts in Oregon and Washington to leverage existing resources and coordinate opportunities for engagement on similar issues. Additionally, as MCEDD continues to lead the update process for the region's comprehensive economic development strategy, longer-term strategies to address these significant issues will be incorporated into the five-year plan to be adopted in early 2022.



APPENDIX A

Partnerships



**School of Planning, Public
Policy and Management
Institute for Policy
Research and Engagement**

The Institute for Policy Research & Engagement (IPRE) is a research center affiliated with the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management at the University of Oregon. It is an interdisciplinary organization that assists Oregon communities by providing planning and technical assistance to help solve local issues and improve the quality of life for Oregon residents. The role of IPRE is to link the skills, expertise, and innovation of higher education with the transportation, economic development, and environmental needs of communities and regions in the State of Oregon, thereby providing service to Oregon and learning opportunities to the students involved.



Resource Assistance for Rural Environments (RARE) is a unique AmeriCorps Program serving rural Oregon to strengthen communities, economies, food systems, and the natural environment. Housed at the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research & Engagement in the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management, we aim to link the energy, expertise, and innovation of the University of Oregon with rural Oregon communities' most pressing needs.

RARE AmeriCorps' mission is to assist Oregon's natural resource-tied rural communities while providing supported, applied experience to college graduates from across the US.

RARE members live in rural communities for 11 months and serve cities, counties, non-governmental organizations, or state agencies to improve economic and environmental conditions in rural Oregon. Now in its 26th year, the RARE AmeriCorps Program has placed over 550 volunteers and served every Oregon County.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. What positive and negative impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic and related shutdown orders are you seeing in your community and/or your organization? How do you think we could leverage these impacts into opportunities for the next six months to a year? (Note: feel free to answer this question for both community AND your organization, or you can answer it for one – whatever you choose).
2. What resources or knowledge would have helped minimize economic impacts and operational disruptions due to COVID-19?
 - What solutions/ideas do you have that could be used to address the resource and knowledge gap?
3. What local resources or strategies have been most beneficial in responding or adapting to COVID-19? Where have you found them, or how have you engaged in them? (focus on communication tools/platforms, health data, guidelines, social media, online/google business tools, and grants)
 - Has it been challenging to find information? Is there a centralized place that has been your go-to for finding resources/information?
4. Where do you want the community and the local economy to be in the next six months, one year, two years? (e.g., implementing a new strategy, building up a certain industry, boosting tourism, etc.).
 - What do you think are the key strategies that are needed to achieve this vision?
 - Which of those strategies is the highest priority for you or your organization? What resources – internally within your organization or otherwise – are you aware of that could be mobilized to deliver these strategies?
5. What are some assets and/or challenges (e.g., physical infrastructure, skills, services, network) revealed during this pandemic? How can the region leverage or address those in the future?
6. What opportunities do you believe exist for future engagement with regional resilience efforts?
7. What questions are we not asking you that you feel are important for us to understand or address?
8. Who else should we be talking to and interviewing that can provide input into these areas discussed?

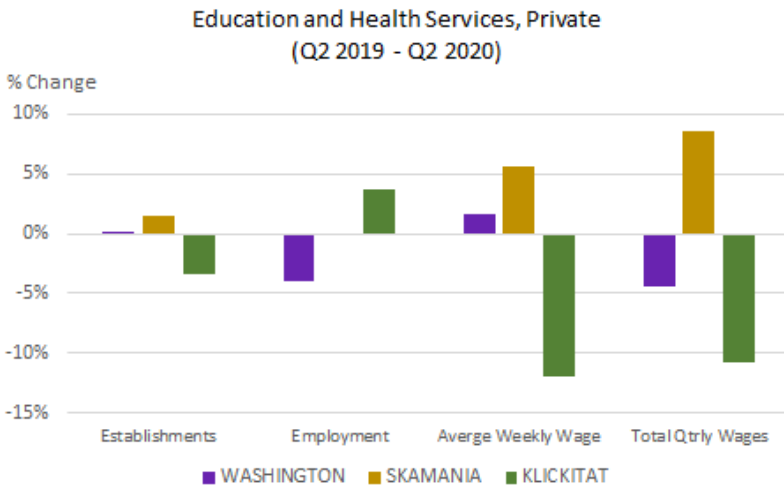
APPENDIX C

Job Loss by Sector – Health Services*

Washington

Health Services

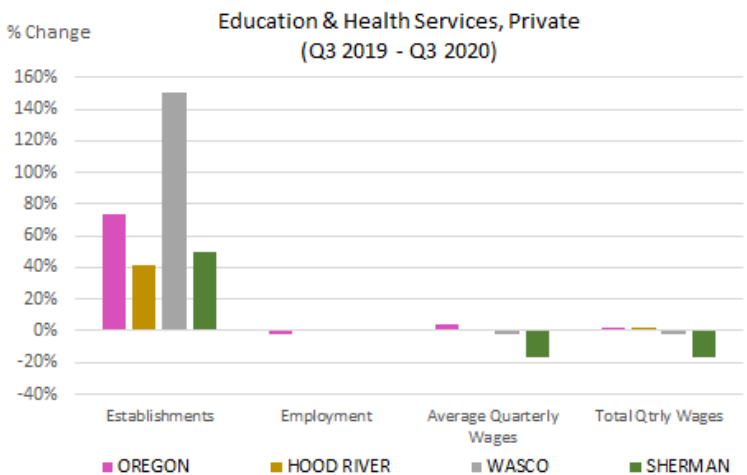
	Washington	Skamania + Klickitat
Q2 2020		
Total Establishments	248,916	206
Total Employment	2,666,085	530
Average Weekly Wages	\$1,435	\$606
Total Wages	\$48,041,590,205	\$4,163,637



Oregon

Health Services

	Oregon	Hood River, Sherman, Wasco
Q3 2020		
Total Establishments	28,068	428
Total Employment	286,843	4,099
Average Quarterly Wages	\$13,411	\$12,211
Total Wages	\$3,846,790,277	\$50,053,539



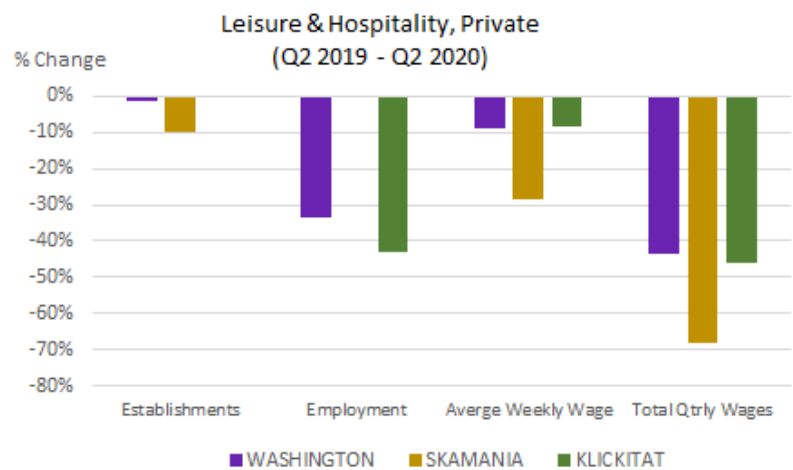
*Data by University of Oregon's Institute for Policy, Research, and Engagement

APPENDIX C

Job Loss by Sector – Leisure & Hospitality*

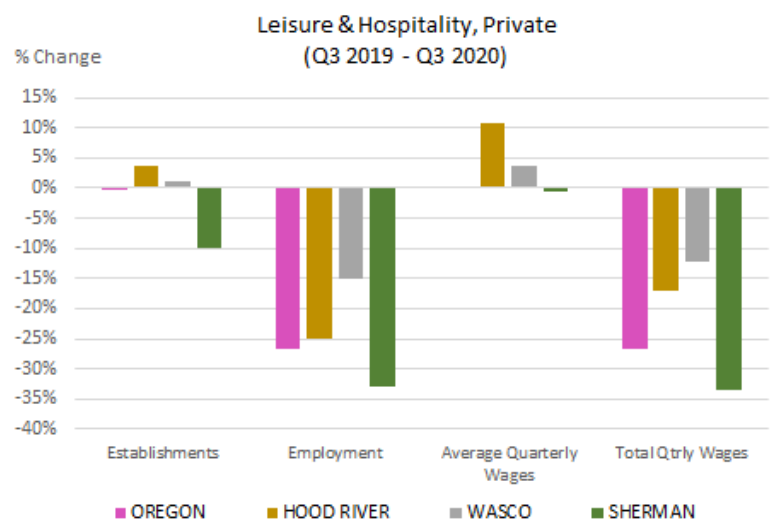
Washington

Leisure & Hospitality	Washington	Skamania + Klickitat
Q2 2020		
Total Establishments	248,916	87
Total Employment	2,666,085	596
Average Weekly Wages	\$1,435	\$373
Total Wages	\$48,041,590,205	\$2,352,120



Oregon

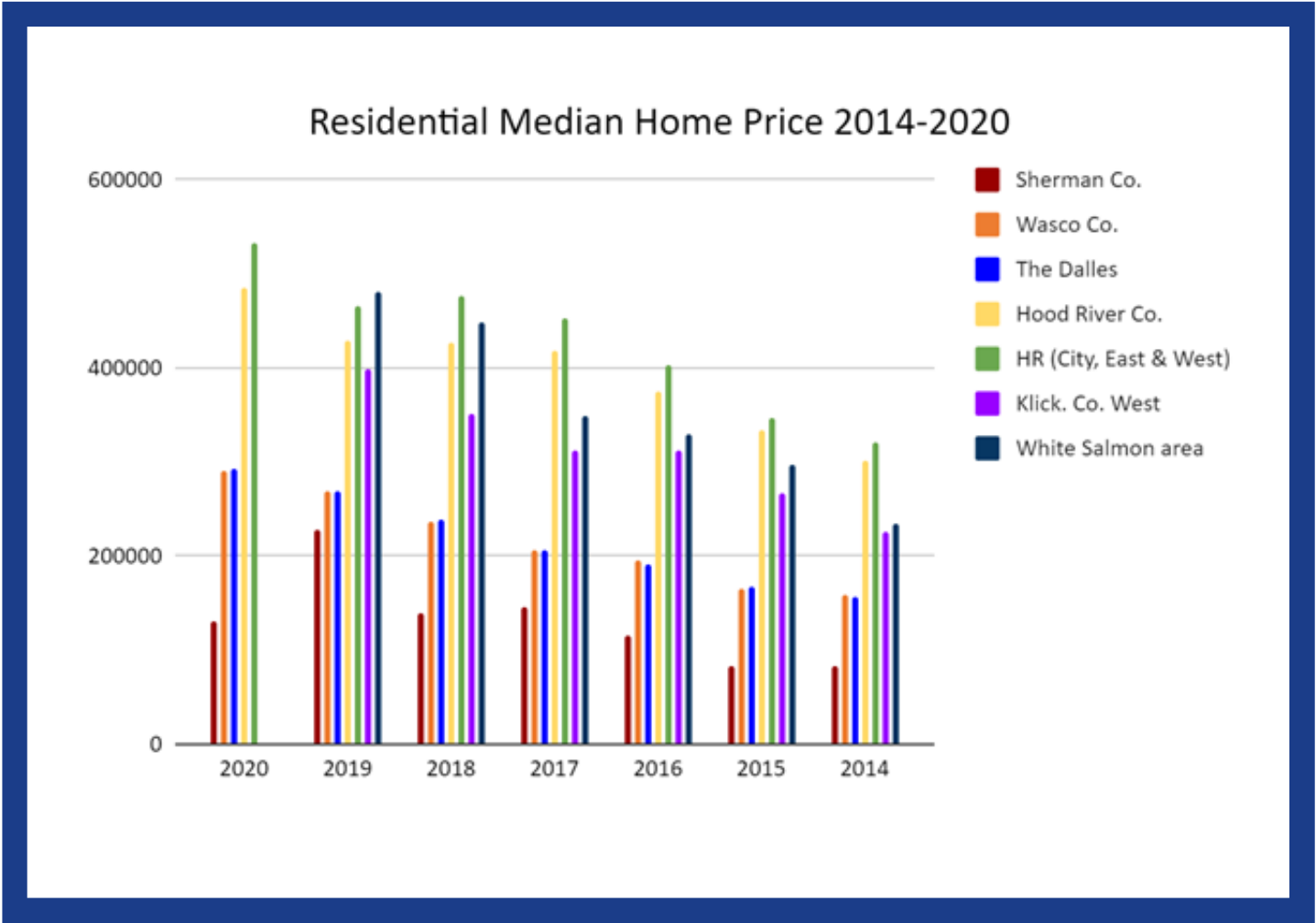
Leisure & Hospitality	Oregon	Hood River, Sherman, Wasco
Q3 2020		
Total Establishments	14,165	242
Total Employment	162,738	3,048
Average Quarterly Wages	\$6,168	\$6,315
Total Wages	\$1,003,797,627	\$19,248,620



*Data by University of Oregon's Institute for Policy, Research, and Engagement

APPENDIX D

Residential Mean Home Price, Mid-Columbia*



*Data shows residential median home prices steadily increasing for all areas shown, except for Sherman County, which has seen a decrease in median home price in 2020. Data by Nan Wimmers, Columbia Gorge Real Estate.

APPENDIX E

American Rescue Plan Allocations

Non-entitled Jurisdictions		2021 Amount	2022 Amount
Grass Valley	\$ 33,632.6	\$ 16,816.3	\$ 16,816.3
Moro	\$ 66,857.5	\$ 33,428.8	\$ 33,428.8
Rufus	\$ 51,570.0	\$ 25,785.0	\$ 25,785.0
Wasco	\$ 83,979.6	\$ 41,989.8	\$ 41,989.8
Total Sherman Co. Cities	\$ 236,039.6		
Antelope	\$ 10,191.7	\$ 5,095.8	\$ 5,095.8
Dufur	\$ 130,249.8	\$ 65,124.9	\$ 65,124.9
Maupin	\$ 89,890.7	\$ 44,945.4	\$ 44,945.4
Mosier	\$ 94,578.9	\$ 47,289.5	\$ 47,289.5
Shaniko	\$ 7,541.9	\$ 3,770.9	\$ 3,770.9
The Dalles	\$ 3,212,625.7	\$ 1,606,312.8	\$ 1,606,312.8
Total Wasco Co. Cities	\$ 3,545,078.7		
Cascade Locks	\$ 236,651.1	\$ 118,325.6	\$ 118,325.6
Hood River	\$ 1,590,108.0	\$ 795,054.0	\$ 795,054.0
Total Hood River Co. Cities	\$ 1,826,759.2		
North Bonneville	\$ 220,000.0	\$ 110,000.0	\$ 110,000.0
Stevenson	\$ 350,000.0	\$ 175,000.0	\$ 175,000.0
Total Skamania Co. Cities	\$ 570,000.0		
Bingen	\$ 160,000.0	\$ 80,000.0	\$ 80,000.0
Goldendale	\$ 760,000.0	\$ 380,000.0	\$ 380,000.0
White Salmon	\$ 590,000.0	\$ 295,000.0	\$ 295,000.0
Total Klickitat Co. Cities	\$ 1,510,000.0		

Counties	Total (in millions)
Wasco County	\$ 5.17
Hood River County	\$ 4.53
Klickitat County	\$ 4.35
Skamania County	\$ 2.34
Sherman County	\$ 0.35

Eligible Uses

Responding to the COVID-19 public health emergency. This includes assistance to households, small businesses, and nonprofits, as well as aid to impacted industries like tourism and hospitality. These are just examples and are not the only eligible activities.

Providing premium pay to essential workers; offsetting lost revenues to provide essential government services; for water, sewer and broadband infrastructure.