

**Date:** April 8, 2024  
**To:** Marion County  
**From:** EConorthwest  
**Subject:** Opal Creek Promise Implementation Plan - Community Engagement Summary

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## Overview

The Opal Creek Promise is a commitment made by the U.S. Congress in 1996 to provide funding to local communities in the Santiam Canyon who were economically affected by the Opal Creek Scenic Recreation Area Act. These funds were earmarked as an investment in economic growth in the Santiam Canyon to make up for the large amount of timber revenues lost after this legislation. After decades of advocacy by the Santiam Canyon community, Congress finally approved allocation of the original **\$15 million** in 2023 to deliver on this promise through a special grant program from the US Forest Service.

The Opal Creek Promise funding is now set to be administered by Marion County, who worked with a consultant team, led by EConorthwest, to bring forward the community priorities from prior engagement processes, and carry out a robust community engagement process that articulates the most needed and desired priorities for advancing economic development. Engagement was conducted throughout the Opal Creek Promise area, including information-sharing and opportunities for feedback in Marion, Linn, and Clackamas Counties.

*"Upon completion of the Opal Creek Management Plan, and receipt of the plan referred to in paragraph (1), the Secretary [of Agriculture] shall provide, subject to appropriations, \$15,000,000 to the State of Oregon. Such funds shall be used to make grants or loans for economic development projects that further the purposes of this section and benefit the local communities in the vicinity of the Opal Creek area." - [Opal Creek Wilderness and Opal Creek Scenic Recreation Area Act of 1996](#)*

### Exhibit 1. North Santiam Canyon Region: Opal Creek Promise Area

Source: EConorthwest



Through the most recent engagement (November 2023 - February 2024), **over 100 community members in the Canyon added their voices and ideas** to shape implementation of the Opal Creek Promise. This work adds to the community priorities that have been articulated in past work, including recent local

efforts in the Cities of Detroit and Gates and wildfire recovery planning. This memorandum summarizes key themes gathered in the engagement process, including insights, concerns, and aspirations for the Canyon community's desired direction of economic growth.

The Opal Creek Promise Implementation Plan is rooted in understanding the community's long history of advocating for economic investment. In addition to the 2000 North Santiam Canyon Economic Opportunity Study (EOS) which was a requirement for receiving the Opal Creek Promise funds, and the 2014 update, other planning efforts have covered a range of topics related to economic development activities, including watershed resiliency, community health, community visioning. These provided a basis for the content of the engagement work.

This initial engagement process for the Opal Creek Promise provides a foundation for ongoing work to advocate for Canyon residents throughout implementation of the Opal Creek Promise and other ongoing efforts for economic revitalization.

## Goals for Community Engagement

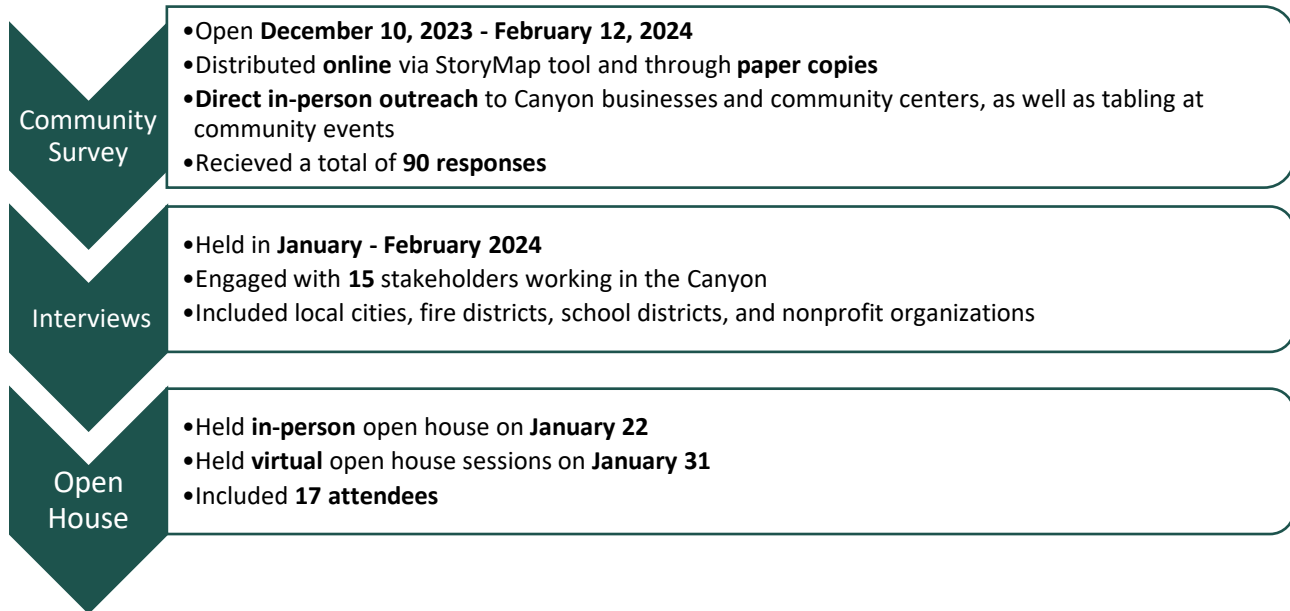
The Opal Creek Promise represents an important milestone for the Santiam Canyon community to envision how to leverage newly available funds for economic development. Marion County led this extensive engagement effort working with the consulting team with the goal of ensuring that allocations of the Opal Creek Promise represent the wishes of the community. Goals for this engagement process and ongoing implementation of the Opal Creek Promise include:

- » **Ensuring Full Transparency.** Implementation of the Opal Creek Promise will use the newly available funds from the Opal Creek Promise to improve economic opportunities in the Canyon. It is critical that this process clearly represents the community and conveys how engagement will guide decision-making.
- » **Increasing Public Understanding.** The engagement process is a chance for all community members and stakeholders to understand the intentions and parameters for the Opal Creek Promise funds. Many Canyon community members already know the long history behind Opal Creek and the path toward economic progress. This project will provide information about the parameters of the Opal Creek Promise to allow a range of groups to articulate their needs and priorities for economic development.
- » **Telling a Cohesive and Representative Story.** Engagement opportunities for the Opal Creek Promise will strive to tell the story of the Canyon's collaborative vision for implementation and make sure that residents, workers, and property owners feel represented and equipped to engage in this process. These opportunities include accessible informational materials and open forums for discussion as well as a deep understanding of what has been articulated in past work.
- » **Earning Community Trust.** This work seeks to earn community trust by deeply involving community members in the process. Maximizing collective impact and benefits is the ultimate goal of the Opal Creek Promise, which requires true community buy-in. The Opal Creek Promise is an opportunity = to come together and uplift the community.



## Phase I Engagement Activities | November 2023–February 2024

The chart below summarizes the first phase of the Opal Creek Promise engagement process. The engagement program was designed to provide information and education about the Opal Creek Promise and provide opportunities for community members to collaborate with the County in laying the groundwork for the Implementation Plan. Marion County's continued engagement and active partnership will help to further define and expand on implementation activities.



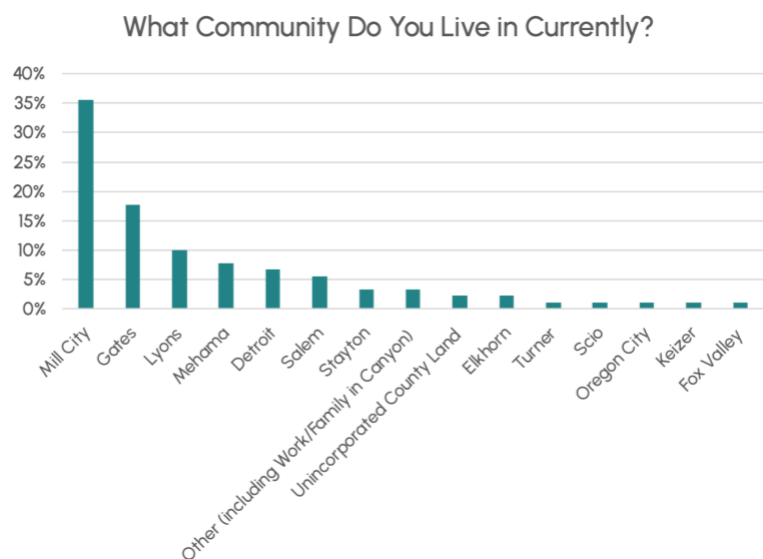
## What We Heard

### Community Survey

The community survey included six questions designed to understand economic development priorities for community members. This was distributed through an online StoryMap with context about the Opal Creek Promise and as a paper survey. County staff worked with community partners to distribute the survey by tabling at in-person events in the Canyon (including the Mill City Christmas Concert), sharing flyers by mail, and spreading the link through social media pages.

The community survey reached **90 participants**. Q5 and Q6 showed that 85 percent of respondents lived in the Santiam Canyon, with some others indicating that they work in or have other families ties to the community.

Additionally, **42 percent** of respondents indicated that they had been personally displaced by the 2020 wildfires. See **Appendix B** for full survey results.



## Deep Outreach Process

Distribution of the Opal Creek Promise survey used an extensive process to reach as many community members as possible. Marion County staff presented about the project at Mill City, Gates, Detroit, and Lyons City Council meetings to announce the fulfillment of the Promise and get the word out about opportunities for engagement. County staff also presented materials from the virtual open house and information about the survey to the Santiam Canyon Long Term Recovery Group (LTRG). The slides, recording, and survey materials for these events were shared with LTRG's extensive distribution list.

County staff also posted the survey on the Marion County's official Facebook page (which was reshared 24 times by community members) and included contact information for the County on the survey's StoryMap (enabling respondents to call or email with questions). Local partners shared information about the survey as well, including the City Recorder from Gates who mailed out the flyer in Gates water bills and put the survey up on the City's website.

Direct outreach was conducted throughout the Canyon, including:

Mehama	Lyons	Mill City	Gates
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gingerbread House</li> <li>• Younger Oil</li> <li>• Marion County Sheriff's Office patrol car</li> <li>• Mehama Real Estate</li> <li>• Ace Hardware</li> <li>• Canyon Auto Rebody</li> <li>• Dragon Chinese Kitchen</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lyons City Hall</li> <li>• Canyon Bible Fellowship</li> <li>• Santiam Chapel Assembly of God</li> <li>• Lyons Corner Market</li> <li>• Lyons Den Trading Post</li> <li>• Santiam Wrecker Sales</li> <li>• Lyons Library</li> <li>• Red Barn Food and Spirits</li> <li>• Lyons Market</li> <li>• Canyon Auto Service</li> <li>• Lyons Rural Fire Protection District</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mill City Library</li> <li>• National Wildfire Suppression Association</li> <li>• Brenda's Barber Shop</li> <li>• Broadway Video and More</li> <li>• Mill City Presbyterian Church</li> <li>• North Santiam Canyon School District</li> <li>• Mill City Grill</li> <li>• Mill City Senior Center</li> <li>• Seven Star Grocery Store</li> <li>• Mill City Post Office</li> <li>• Mill City City Hall</li> <li>• Santiam Medical Clinic</li> <li>• Oregon Representative Payee Program</li> <li>• eNRG Kayaking</li> <li>• North Santiam Historical Society</li> <li>• 7-11</li> <li>• Giovannis Mountain Pizza</li> <li>• Santiam Outreach Community Center</li> <li>• Subway</li> <li>• Canyon Cannabis</li> <li>• Rosie's Mountain Coffee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frontier Country</li> <li>• Gates City Hall</li> <li>• Highway 22 Canteen</li> <li>• Sierra Market</li> <li>• The Get-A-Way</li> <li>• Camp Benadoo RV Park</li> <li>• Sierra Mexican Restaurant</li> <li>• Canyon Espresso</li> </ul>
			Detroit
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mountain High Grocery</li> <li>• Detroit Post Office</li> <li>• H&amp;B's CBD Mini Market</li> </ul>
			Idanha
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Idanha City Hall</li> <li>• Idanha Rural Fire Protection District</li> </ul>



## Key Themes

Survey respondents elevated the following projects, tools, and selection priorities, as detailed in the summary below for each question:

- **Public Infrastructure, Amenities, and Utilities** were the highest priority when defining economic development, prioritizing current project areas, and proposing additional projects to be considered.
- **Business, Industry, and Job Growth** through projects that support existing businesses, expand current industries (such as outdoor recreation), and attract new businesses was a critical concern for economic development.
- **Recreation & Tourism** including restoration of and increased access to outdoor recreation are ways that the Canyon can both develop community amenities and attract visitors.
- **Youth & Families** as a target beneficiary surfaced across project areas, including housing, workforce development, programs, and amenities that support youth and families.
- **Workforce Housing** was discussed both as a tool to attract employers, sustain workers in the area, and maintain opportunities for youth to stay in the Canyon.
- **Quick and Broad Results** were desired as priorities for selecting projects; respondents were focused on seeing results through shovel ready projects.

The next sections elaborate on the responses for each question and highlight key nuances to the broader themes. All questions were optional, and the total number of respondents is included for each.

### Q1: What does economic development mean to you for the North Santiam Canyon community?

Responses: 84

This open-ended question provided the opportunity for community members to express key direction that people would like to see for shaping economic opportunities in the Canyon. Responses are summarized below by general type of economic development activity. Key topics expressed included building out public service and amenities, offering opportunities that are focused on community needs, supporting local businesses, developing recreation assets, and sustaining a base of workers in the area.

#### 1 Public Services and Amenities

Economic development mean providing physical infrastructure, social capital, and public service capacity as key ingredients for the community to thrive.

Success would entail:

- Full recovery from 2020 wildfires via financial assistance to families still struggling
- Sewer, water, and broadband solutions
- Safe roads and crossings
- Amenities for "complete neighborhoods" where residents can live, work, and play.
- Healthy institutions and community facilities (schools, fire department, medical facilities, etc.) for a safe and healthy population.
- Opportunities for youth to work, learn, and play in meaningful ways.



## Quotes

"Supporting our youth for a better community future"

"A healthy vital community that supports its residents & balances the current resources without overstretched schools & public services (fire, medical, policing)."

"Creating opportunities for people that live there to thrive. Shop there, play there, continue to be able to afford to stay and maintain homes there."

## 2

### Community-Focused Economic Opportunities

Economic development means building a resilient economy by upholding local economic values for strategic and sustainable growth.

Success would entail:

- Maintaining affordability as to not displace current residents
- Leveraging the unique assets of the region
- Balancing the rural lifestyle with strategic growth

## Quotes

"Growth, financial opportunity, and security for the area. We need to promote the growth for our future and mostly for our children."

"Economic development in the North Santiam Canyon community is an augmentation of the unique synergy between urban and rural lifestyles, where tourism and industry find a way to co-exist and thrive."

"Creating sustainable and livable communities"

## 3

### Business, Industry, and Job Growth

Economic development means building a supportive business culture to attract more businesses, industries, and jobs.

Success would entail:

- Increased employment opportunities
- Salaries that can support families who wish to stay in the Canyon
- Stable businesses with reliable goods and services for the community
- Investment in local entrepreneurial talent

## Quotes

"Building successful and sustainable business culture using the resources we have in the canyon. We need to teach those who have a genuine business how to grow it with limited staff and seasonal limitations."

"Businesses growing and thriving. Local residents employed."

"Small business growth, increased commercial tax revenue that supports the local community."

## 4

### Lifestyle, Culture, and Tourism

Economic development means building a culture around outdoor recreation and unique lifestyle enjoyed in the canyon.



Success would entail:

- Restoring and enhancing the recreational amenities for all to enjoy
- Equitable access to outdoor recreation for various mobility levels
- Hosting events and sporting activities
- Investments in downtown placemaking and walkability

## Quotes

"Rebuilding so people can enjoy and recreate in the area"

"Improving parks after the fires and the roads to access them, encourage exploration of nature's wonders out here and help keep them beautiful, here, and available to everyone, as well as maintained."

"It means creating infrastructure to support visitors seeking quiet recreation (hiking, nature study, birding and photography)."

## 5 Housing

Economic development means increasing housing to support employment and population growth. Housing affordability is needed to facilitate pathways for younger populations to live the canyon.

Success would entail:

- Housing that is affordable to working families
- Housing to support the employment base

## Quotes

"Having affordable housing. Can't have just retired folks living here. Need our younger folks to work in our community."

"Aggressively create more housing for job seekers of all income levels."

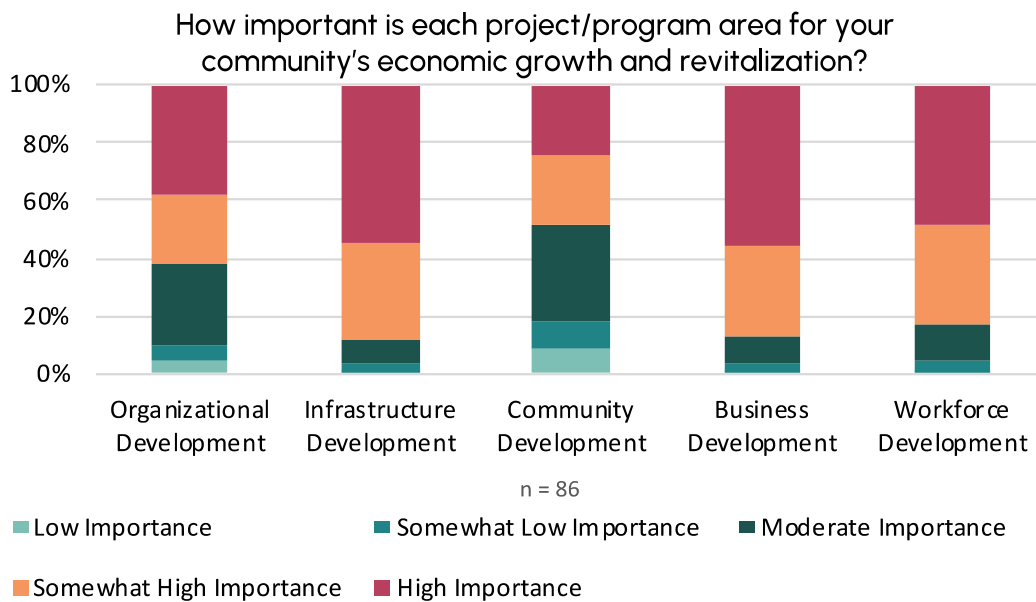
**Q2: Considering the current conditions in the area and grant funds available, please tell us how important you think each project / program area is for your community's economic growth and revitalization? (On a scale of 1 to 5)**

**Responses: 86**

40 respondents placed the highest priority on infrastructure development (also referred to as 'product development'), followed closely by business development activities (see figure below). These two types of projects involve maintaining, upgrading, or developing physical features and programs that nurture business growth and investment. Workforce development also received a large share of responses that indicated it was somewhat high or high importance to build the skills of local workforce and match industry needs.

Organizational development (or support for community organizations/capacity building) had a larger share of respondents that ranked it only moderately important. Community development (called 'Market Development' in the survey) received the lowest ranking, focusing on activities to enlarge the market area and grow the community overall. Over half of respondents ranked this as only having only low or moderate importance.





**Q3: Are there any other types of economic development projects or programs you think are missing from this list?**

Responses: 52

Expanding on project types listed in Q2, 52 survey respondents provided additional ideas for project types and highlighted specific important considerations for investing in economic development, with key themes listed below.

<p><b>17%</b> (9) of Q3 respondents emphasized <b>reliable infrastructure and utilities</b> (internet, power, sewer, water, etc.) and support funding projects that restore, expand, or develop this outcome. They also wish to see an increase in capacity for public safety/emergency services.</p>	<p><i>"Building emergency services that will serve and protect those who are coming here to live, work or recreate"</i></p>
<p><b>17%</b> (9) of Q3 respondents are interested in projects that create spaces, places, programs, and services to <b>support youth and families</b>. Examples include, daycare, sport fields, community centers, CTF programs, YoungLife, etc.</p>	<p><i>"Multi uses sport complex for the community youth. There isn't enough fields or gym space to go around for the current youth in our area. We need more for this anticipated growth to keep our families engaged and the youth a space to grow."</i></p>
<p><b>15%</b> (8) of Q3 respondents focused on <b>enhancing the recreation experience</b> via signage, improved facilities, and targeted business recruitment as key elements of economic development.</p>	<p><i>"These will encourage visitors to stay in the area and patronize motels, restaurants etc. for the economic benefit of local communities. Quiet recreation also supports the mental health needs of local residents."</i></p>
<p><b>13%</b> (7) of Q3 respondents are interested in <b>a clean and maintained public realm with accessible</b></p>	<p><i>"Ways to improve infrastructure (park maintenance, river side clean up,</i></p>





	<b>facilities</b> such as bathrooms and lighting and public amenities such as a skate park and community center. Several comments express an interest in leveraging the above opportunities to provide jobs for youth or to retain youth.	<i>landscaping), home curb appeal (increase enforcement), and job opportunities for youth."</i>
<b>12% (6)</b>	of Q3 respondents identified <b>supporting, attracting, and expanding business</b> as key economic development activities	<i>"Local Chamber needs additional training, enhancement, and staff to be able to convene the canyon as one economic region vs. a bunch of small towns working independently."</i>
<b>8% (4)</b>	Of Q3 respondents are concerned about <b>workforce housing</b> , and how the current gap in housing options is hindering business and employee recruitment	<i>"Employee housing is the number one challenge employers face when recruiting."</i>
<b>8% (4)</b>	Of Q3 respondents support projects that <b>promote visitor growth</b> , such as destination development or hospitality and other tourism-oriented businesses.	<i>"One thing might be to focus on tourism for the Canyon. It is a beautiful place, including Detroit Lake, that could be utilized to build resorts and investments for people, creating good jobs that could potentially support families and increased population growth."</i>

**Q4: Rank the consideration on the list in order of importance to you, with the most important at the top of the list.**

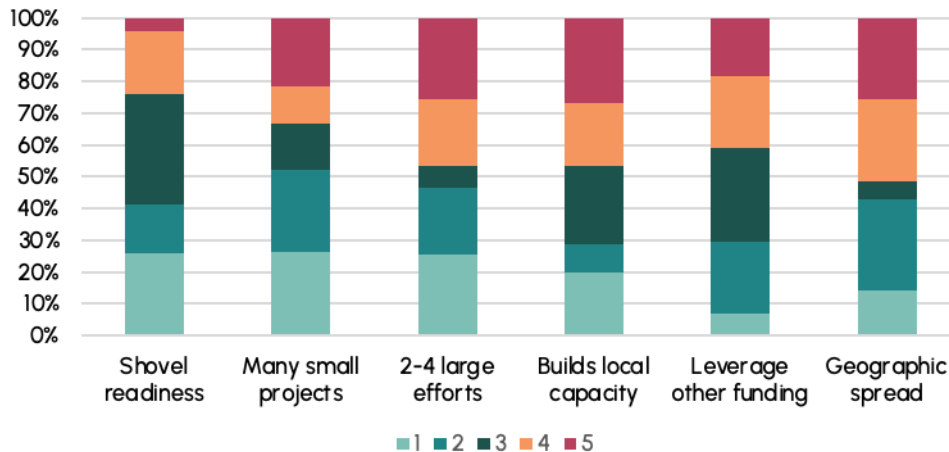
**Responses: 87**

In this question, respondents were asked to rank potential considerations for Opal Creek Promise allocations on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating the highest importance and 5 indicating the lowest importance. Shovel readiness was a highly important consideration for Q4 respondents in selecting projects for funding, with 76 percent of respondents ranking it with at least some importance (or a score of 1-3).

After shovel readiness, respondents were interested in advancing as many projects and programs as possible with the understanding that this would mean multiple, smaller investments. About two thirds of respondents ranked 'many small projects' as high or somewhat high importance (or a score of 1-2). The remaining options were ordered overall by importance with the following results: (3) Focusing investments on 2 – 4 larger projects, (4) building local capacity, (5) leveraging other government funds, and (6) an even geographic spread.



Please rank these considerations in order of importance  
(1 = Highest Importance, 5 = Lowest Importance)



## Stakeholder Interviews

The goal of holding stakeholder interviews was 1) to gather ideas and perspectives about economic development priorities from key organizations who serve the Canyon community and 2) to ensure the process cast a wide net to discuss potential projects. Building on recent and concurrent engagement plans that establish project needs in the Canyon, these interviews focused on evaluating concerns, challenges, and opportunities for a range of projects.

The project team heard from **12 stakeholders** including public and nonprofit sector partners operating in the Canyon by virtual and in-person conversations as well as written comments. This section includes illustrative comments from transcribed notes related to each theme in *orange*.

### Key Insights

The interviews involved reviewing with stakeholders the types of economic development projects and programs queried in the Community Survey and also included deeper discussions of specific projects community members have mentioned and that their organizations may be interested in pursuing. What follows are key insights, unique ideas, and new project types.

### Simple and Transparent Grantmaking Process

**Transparency in communications from Marion County will be key moving forward.** Interviewees representing both nonprofits and public agencies emphasized the importance of understanding the evaluation and decision-making process for where funds are being allocated. Past processes that have not always felt transparent have caused problems with community trust, especially in the wake of the 2020 wildfires. Communicating timelines, expectations, and decision-making rationale should be an

### WHO WE TALKED TO

- » Cities of Lyons, Mill City, Detroit
- » Santiam Canyon School District
- » Rural Fire Protection Districts of Gates, Lyons, and Idanha-Detroit
- » Long Term Recovery Group
- » Santiam Service Integration Team
- » North Santiam Watershed Council
- » Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center
- » Friends of the Breitenbush Cascades
- » Upward Bound



integral part of successfully implementing the Opal Creek Promise. Many stakeholders were curious about the application timeline and how it aligns with current project needs.

*Be VERY clear about what funds can and cannot be used for, and when available. These cannot be transmitting only verbally – must public, written, and everything transparent.*

*Make sure the funding decisions are transparent... why and why not certain things have been funded... Show your work.*

*There could be an advisory team from the Canyon, that would help to get them directly involved to put trust into it.*

*Face to face interaction is critical... Have noticed huge benefit to develop relationships through in-person opportunities for conversation*

**Capacity building and technical assistance** is needed to ensure local, nonprofit organizations can successfully compete for Opal Creek Promise funding. Stakeholders shared some lessons learned from recent economic recovery and wildfire disaster recovery grant processes. Primarily, there were suggestions for keeping the grant application process as simple as possible with clear timelines and decision criteria, along with recommendations that the county offer workshops, access to professional grant writers, and/or other one-on-one grant writing consultation.

*Organizations in canyon are going to need help applying for grants to get everyone on a level playing field to compete fairly. There are many organizations who are smaller and do not have grant writers on staff and who will likely need assistance in completing the grant application/proposal. Workshops? Contracted grant writing services paid by County?*

*Look to make the application process super simplified to allow more people to qualify*

*Maybe have part of the grant process to explore potential partnerships or collaboration before applications are due and reduce the number of similar efforts competing for the same type of funding*

**Coordination with existing recovery efforts in the Canyon**, including potential coordination with foundations and nonprofits that are working to fund community priorities is important to maximize the benefits of the Opal Creek Promise. This communication can avoid duplication and recognize how the Canyon is moving forward as a whole.

*Avoid duplication of efforts; Don't step over the work that other people have been trying to do*

*Draw from studies already completed to direct funding; use them to select projects—use them to get some of these projects done with this money!*

## Economic Development Priorities, Programs, and Projects

Investments for districts that lost timber revenue as a result of the original Opal Creek legislation (such as fire districts and public schools) are an important priority for many stakeholders, including nonprofit partners not representing a specific district. Catalytic funding can help to expand long-term investment options for these public services, like building resilient utility systems in school buildings or



new training spaces and equipment for firefighters. Each of these projects are in the spirit of the original Opal Creek Promise to invest in the community.

*Schools/fire were thriving and well-funded prior to wilderness designation. Those dollars should go back to what the original tax revenue would have supported.*

*Make sure the right people are reminded about the impact of timber tax dollars 30 years ago. A lot of people understand that those things are seriously connected.*

*If folks are going to use this money to build infrastructure, draw in people, add recreation, we need the fire district need to provide adequate service/care for people coming to the area.*

*School is a center of the community. We're a small town and it draws people together.*

**Economically sustainable and accessible recreation for visitors and residents** has broad support among stakeholders, but with some nuanced needs to ensure local benefit. Investments in diverse recreation activities are important for drawing in visitors and businesses to the Canyon, including visitors in extended seasons and for a variety of uses. New amenities like lodging, trails, accessibility improvements, and placemaking can enhance recreational experiences and attract a wider set of visitors. Existing nonprofits and businesses operate recreational programs that could be expanded with support for activities like purchasing, rehabilitating, and developing sites. However, interviewees stressed the need to invest in new projects that also cater to a local audience to ensure economic development outcomes for the Opal Creek Promise also benefit residents' quality of life.

*Oregonians need low-cost recreational opportunities. It feels like many of the recreation opportunities being proposed are not meant for people of North Santiam Canyon. There is a whole range of North Santiam residents and Oregonians who can't afford snowmobiles, mountain bikes, etc.... Everyone should be able to enjoy this area – average low-cost camping, fishing, being in nature.*

*Need to balance recreational needs of urban residents with how it's preserved for long term residents and the future.*

*Recreational trails studies are still relevant... Use abandoned infrastructure to build trails*

**Transportation safety improvements and signage along Oregon Highway 22 (OR-22) and on local streets** were discussed by stakeholders as a way to both support people who live and work in the Canyon, and to attract visitors to local businesses. Improvements can serve as both safety features (like widening shoulders) and support for local industries (such as pullouts along OR-22 with access to trailheads or signage that highlights the scenic corridor). Improved transit service further into the Canyon and more frequently was also called out as a critical need to support and grow the local workforce.

*Highway 22 is such a well-traveled corridor – need to capture the interest of people traveling through. And also need to leverage these resources to improve the highway itself, make it safer.*

*Highway 22 definitely needs some improvements; it got beaten up during the fire and they have done some patchwork. That's a state highway project. Would hope this funding goes into the cities to repair their streets.*

*Transportation is critical – especially for people who don't drive or don't have a car. The bus two times a day to Gates is not adequate... We need bus service further into the canyon and more frequently.*



**Developing business districts and commercial nodes** through technical assistance programs, targeted funding opportunities (e.g. façade improvement programs), marketing, and supporting small, locally-owned businesses were discussed. In particular, several stakeholders noted interest in helping businesses to prepare for disasters as a way to build economic resilience. Strengthening existing commercial areas in local Downtowns is important, as well as supporting opportunities for new commercial nodes nearby underserved residential areas and recreation hubs.

*It would be great to see some help for small businesses in Detroit that are struggling to come back. Some food carts are trying to make their way. But they need help.*

*Business support initiatives including providing better visibility for Canyon businesses and modernizing the potholed/gravel parking lots.*

*Zoning changes and allowances for businesses may be critical for the area to comeback.*

*There is a lack of jobs and not much variety of jobs in the canyon. Need more business recruitment.*

*Right at the junction of Hwy 22 and Little North Fork – near restaurant site. There is an intersection that doesn't really have a town, but a central location for cars passing through that could be a good place for some specific planning and zoning for a commercial cluster.*

**Stable internet connectivity** can offer new economic opportunities, support expansion of existing businesses, attract new businesses, and increase resiliency of emergency response. Stakeholders noted that the Canyon has seen improvements in recent years that brought broadband capabilities to the area and have made cell reception more expansive. However, they also noted gaps in the system and concerns about emergency access for more remote residents and recreational visitors. Continuing to strengthen these systems, extending coverage to more areas, and increasing reliability is important for attracting employers and residents, as well as ensuring that the Canyon has functioning emergency response systems. One respondent noted that other federal funds may be available, and it is important to prioritize Opal Creek Promise funds where other options are not available.

*Stabilize internet access – it is critical in a disaster (people couldn't get info about the wildfires). This is also good for economic development.*

*We can get cut off very quickly... can lose cell service, internets gone, we are cut off. Communication services are key.*

*Broadband would be huge. Lots of places without capabilities. Other federal programs could provide. Don't use these funds if other fed funds are available.*

**Emergency response capabilities, mitigating disasters, and community-wide preparedness** were important for private, public, and nonprofit stakeholders who emphasized a range of needs particularly related to wildfires. Evacuation planning for businesses, emergency response notification systems, wildfire prevention, community preparedness workshops and planning, and expanding capacity of emergency services (like fire districts and the hospital) are important for overall wellbeing as well as economic development.

*We absolutely need evacuation plan updated – had a plan before wildfires that proved to be wholly inadequate. Would be nice to have resources for a consultant to go over plan to ensure it will work.*



*Look at the three major Rural Fire Districts and their buildings to ensure that they have safe, secure protection to be able to respond. Allow them to consider emergency response... [it] helps with disaster preparedness.*

*Early warning systems are definitely inadequate as shown by fire response. It's still a problem. If an earthquake happens, the Canyon would be cut off. Generators are needed to fill reservoir and be self-sustaining in the event of another natural disaster that shuts down highways.*

**Educational programs and workforce development** is needed to expand economic opportunities for the Canyon community. Although ongoing programs may require different types of sustained funding sources, stakeholders noted interest in targeted investments in equipment, facilities, and infrastructure that can help catalyze new resources. Partnerships with schools and providing wraparound services like childcare and transportation access can also increase opportunities for local businesses to attract and sustain their needed workforce.

*Would like to see more programming and work with schools and workforce options for young people in the canyon; bring more educational events into the area.*

*\$15 million is a drop in the bucket for workforce programs. Can't do sustainable workforce or grassroots workforce development for this level of funding.*

*There are many barriers to Canyon residents accessing opportunities – cost of courses, location outside of canyon, lack of transportation options, need for childcare or other supportive services to allow people to enroll and complete programs.*

**Clarity around sewer and housing capabilities** were common questions from interviewees, who noted that both are very important for economic development. Sewer has been a limiting factor for residential and commercial development, which further restricts the workforce and customer base available to businesses in the Canyon, as well as new retail and services. However, some stakeholders also noted that it may not be the best direct use of the Opal Creek Promise funds, which would not fulfill the entirety of the funds needed to develop sewer systems. While housing was not a project type offered for discussion, many stakeholders mentioned the lack of housing affordable to working families is having a detrimental impact on their ability to expand business attract staff to job openings and meet the service needs of the community.

*Housing is critical to bring people to the area. As a baseline for this, if you don't have a sewer system in the community you don't get housing. It becomes about the sewer line, streets, pieces of infrastructure. If we don't have this, businesses won't come.*

*Businesses come and go. Septic is a huge barrier to new business development like restaurants*

*Infrastructure is important; there is a decent sum of money out there for the sewer project so less inclined to use this money on the sewer project*

*Affordable housing is constraint to employee retention*

*A big interest is not subsidized housing, but workforce/entry level housing and the lack thereof. People are commuting to work here, but don't always live here. Would be great to have a thriving community to support the area*



## Open House

Two open house options (in-person and virtual) provided opportunities for community members to discuss the Opal Creek Promise with project staff. These open houses drew **17 attendees** in total including community members and representatives from organizations. The open houses shared materials about the history of the Opal Creek Promise, potential priorities, and discussion questions

Attendees were encouraged to provide their feedback in the Community Survey. They also provided the following specific project and program ideas:

- **Increasing the capacity of Santiam Hospital's emergency department**, which has seen an increase in patient admittance
- **A Veterans Memorial** honoring military veterans and emergency police and fire workers
- **Direct pipeline to jobs for youth** in the community through apprenticeships and work programs
- **Mill City Downtown revitalization project** including storefront improvement grants
- **Anchor points** that build volunteer capacity
- **Infrastructure and construction** for rebuilding Idanha-Detroit Fire Station

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### Organizational attendees for the in-person and online open houses included:

- USFS
- LTRG
- Idanha-Detroit RFPD
- Santiam Hospital
- Point Man Ministries
- Friends of the Breitenbush Cascades
- Breitenbush Cabin Owners Association

## Summary: Implications for the Opal Creek Promise

Initial engagement activities provided key considerations for both the implementation process of the Opal Creek Promise and the types of funding priorities for the community today.

### Process Considerations: What Should the County Consider for Implementation?

During stakeholder conversations and the Open House, organizations and community members in the Canyon were eager to hear about the application and implementation process of the Opal Creek Promise. These considerations incorporate feedback about how the County can ensure that the process offers opportunities for as many ideas to surface as possible.

- **Ensure transparency in decision-making, communications, and implementation process for distributing the Opal Creek Promise funds.** As the County creates and implements the application and allocation process, it should make sure that the community understands how to apply for funds, why projects are chosen, what progress is being made, and what the results are for the Canyon. Building trust in the Canyon through frequent and clear communications should be a central goal for implementation.
- **Consider offering hands-on technical support for the application process.** Local capacity for applications is limited in the Canyon for some organizations, including grant writing and



administrative activities like tracking and reporting. Supporting applicants for the funds as well as the ultimate grant awardees can help to build more community trust and ensure full participation from organizations in the Canyon.

- **Coordinate with ongoing recovery efforts, including the work of the Long-Term Recovery Group and existing foundation funding that is supporting community priorities.** The Opal Creek Promise is a relatively flexible way to invest in economic development and the County should avoid duplicating efforts or funding projects that have other sources available. Building on concurrent work can maximize both the impact of the Opal Creek Promise and other initiatives.
- **Connect the narrative of the original intent of the Opal Creek Promise to help local districts that were affected by the 1996 legislation.** Decision-making about the Opal Creek Promise should consider the initial impacts and potentially prioritize funding for projects that support schools and fire districts that have seen long-term impacts of reduced timber revenues in the Canyon. The Opal Creek Promise could support funding needs for equipment, training facilities, building improvements, or other catalytic projects as identified by districts in their potential applications.

## Funding Priorities: What are Key Factors for Selecting Projects?

Considering community interest expressed in the survey in accomplishing as many projects as possible, the County should facilitate a range of shovel-ready projects. Community members and stakeholders elevated the following project categories in survey responses, open house feedback, and interviews.

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**Appendix A** includes a full list of projects supported by community members from engagement.  
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- **Prioritize shovel-ready projects with a clear and rapid path to implementation.** Survey respondents listed 'shovel-ready projects' as the highest priority for allocating Opal Creek Promise funds, with specific comments from the survey and interviews expressing the importance of seeing tangible results from the Opal Creek Promise. Allocations should seek to maximize the impact of the Opal Creek Promise's flexibility to fund projects that have already an identified path forward.
- **Balance economic development that serves local residents with projects that can attract visitors to support local businesses.** Particularly for outdoor amenities, investments from the Opal Creek Promise should benefit community members in the Canyon by offering low-barrier recreation opportunities as well as amenities that draw tourists to spend time and money in the Canyon. Diversifying what the Canyon can offer for recreation can also create steadier year-round visitation and reach new visitor market segments (e.g., families with children).
- **Building resilience and preparedness for disasters is critical for the community and economic development.** In particular, strengthening the Canyon's capacity to respond to disasters through emergency responses systems, increased capabilities for fire districts and the hospital, and emergency planning with residents and businesses is important for community and economic wellbeing. Interviewees stressed that without robust emergency planning and capabilities, economic progress may be stunted or set back.

## Project Types: What Kind of Investments Could Advance Economic Development?





The project team asked community members about specific types of investments that could be funded by the Opal Creek Promise, either through physical construction-related funds or more flexible programmatic funds. These projects align with different types of investments that communities can enhance to grow economic opportunities through **physical** capital (like infrastructure or facilities), **natural** capital (like forests or water), **human** capital (like workforce development or training), and **social** capital (like community building activities or cultural heritage).

- **Physical Capital:** The Opal Creek Promise can fund catalytic physical capital projects that support organizations in the Canyon. Respondents recommended targeted investments that open the door for new economic opportunities such as:
  - Infrastructure (e.g., utilities, internet, and transportation)
  - Public facilities (e.g., schools, fire stations, community centers, and hospitals)
  - Recreational amenities (e.g. trails, parks, and accessibility features)

Funding for these types of physical projects could advance incremental steps towards a larger goal such as land acquisition and rehabilitation, purchasing equipment, or targeted improvements to existing buildings and facilities.

- **Natural Capital:** Investments in physical capital can influence the productivity of natural capital, and these two forms of capital often work together to produce economic value. For example, investments in recreation access depend on water quality. Development in central areas can influence the way stormwater is managed and can affect hydrology and ecosystem productivity. Although less directly discussed in engagement, investments in natural capital have implications for economic development like environmental restoration to leverage the natural beauty of the Canyon.
- **Human Capital:** Programmatic capacity building for businesses and residents in the Canyon can encompass a variety of activities for businesses and organizations in the Canyon. Survey respondents desired:
  - Targeted business technical assistance
  - Workforce training
  - Opportunities that cater to youth to expand economic opportunities

Although these funds may not be a sustaining, long-term source for ongoing programs or positions at an organization, these funds can help to launch new programs or meet specific short-term needs (e.g. hiring interim staff to develop a program).

- **Social Capital:** Community-level programs and planning related to social capital can support the greater economic ecosystem in the Canyon. Respondents identified key priorities to help build social capital, including local business district organization and planning, branding and marketing the Canyon and its businesses, as well as planning for greater disaster resilience planning and implementation. These investments could be critical for the Canyon to increase visitors and employment opportunities while benefitting the wellbeing of residents and workers.



The project team used best practices for community engagement in this process to reach community members throughout the Santiam Canyon through in-person and online communication channels. This depth of outreach offered residents, businesses, and organizations operating in the Canyon the opportunity to share their priorities for economic development. Conducting these activities produced a comprehensive list of potential projects, as well as direction for implementation and project selection criteria.

The results of the survey, interviews, and open house events were shared with the Marion County Board of Commissioners for review and discussion about emerging priorities for investment in economic development in early 2023. The foundation of community input established through this process will inform the next phase of implementing the Opal Creek Promise, which includes prioritizing investments that align with economic opportunities in the Santiam Canyon. Investments made with the Opal Creek Promise funding will be a part of an overall economic development and recovery strategy for the Canyon and calibrated to best practices for uplifting rural communities.

