

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT

With the adoption of the Western theme and the opening of the North Cascades Highway in 1972, Winthrop's economy shifted from a traditional rural, resource-based economy (logging, mining, and agriculture) towards tourism and recreation. Following that shift, recreation and tourism gained increasing influence on the economy of the entire Methow Valley.



Winthrop's Western Theme celebrates the era of the late 1800s to early 1900s, and identifies Winthrop with its early settler history. With financial backing from Katherine Wagner and the architectural expertise of Robert Jorgenson, business owners transformed downtown to look like the frontier town it once was. This proved a solid strategy to draw visitors and remains a central force in Winthrop's identity.



Winthrop Mountain Sports building before and after westernization, and as it looks today.



In parallel with the efforts put forth by local government and Winthrop's Chamber of Commerce to enhance the Town's appeal, Methow Trails – formerly the Methow Valley Sports Trail Association – has played a key role in Winthrop's economy by promoting and operating a wide network of recreational trails. Now Winthrop's businesses are largely geared towards attracting and serving visitors who come to recreate and enjoy local amenities. Winthrop sits at the center of a vast web of outdoor recreation opportunities, including hiking, biking, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, ice skating, hunting, and many others.

The success of the recreation and tourism economy ripples in various ways through the community. Winthrop and the Methow Valley attract numerous second/vacation home owners, as well as numerous telecommuters choosing to live here for the access to recreation. Thus, construction remains another key driver of the local economy. During the economic downturn beginning in 2008, the local economy lost many jobs as housing

development dropped dramatically. As the economy has recovered, construction and real estate sales have rebounded.

The tourism economy produces numerous service oriented jobs – retail customer service, wait staff at restaurants, hotel/motel staff, etc. These jobs often are seasonal in nature and pay relatively low wages, which creates typical challenges related to affordable housing and low median household income relative to statewide and national numbers.

While tourism drives a substantial portion of the local economy, there are other key generators to consider. Salmon recovery efforts, ramped up during the 1990s, have infused millions of dollars into the local economy in the form of jobs and the use of local contractors and materials. The Okanogan Wenatchee Nation Forest operates the Methow Valley Ranger District from Winthrop, employing a seasonal and year-round work force. The local school district is another significant employer. Technology offers further potential for economic growth, as a few local companies strive to provide a growing array of services, and a significant number of people are able to work remotely for large companies in urban areas.

While tourism, recreation, and the natural environment are likely to remain central to our economy well into the future, it remains important for Winthrop to strive for a diverse, well-rounded economy that makes our town not only a fun place to visit, but a wonderful place to live.

### **Goals and Policies**

*Goal 1 Promote a diverse year-round economy based on tourism, recreation, and environmentally sound commerce in support of a livable community.*

Policy 1.1 Participate in local and regional economic development organizations and initiatives.

Policy 1.2 Support development of amenities such as parks, trails, public facilities and water access that enhance recreation and tourism.

Policy 1.3 Support development of the recreational access and commerce along shorelines in a manner that will enhance the public enjoyment of the shoreline while preserving the net functions of the shoreline environment.

*Goal 2 Promote and implement the “Western” theme throughout commercial areas.*

Policy 2.1 Support continued adherence to and enforcement of western theme design standards for structures and signs.

Policy 2.2 Maintain an advisory committee to guide compliance and make recommendations regarding implementation of the western theme.

Policy 2.3 Emphasize themed gateway entrances to Town from the west and south on SR 20.

*Goal 3 Develop a transportation and circulation system that functions to provide mobility and access for all modes of travel in support of the local economy.*

Policy 3.1 Ensure good access to businesses and amenities such as parks, trails, historic/cultural sites, and river corridors.

Policy 3.2 Provide for a transportation system that fosters mobility of people and goods to and through Winthrop.

*Goal 4 Ensure development proceeds within a framework that is reasonable, timely and equitable while protecting public health, safety and welfare, as well as valuable natural features and functions of the landscape.*

Policy 4.1 Actively participate in the review and approval processes initiated by the county, state or federal governments on new developments and changes in regulations.

Policy 4.2 Ensure local permit processes are reasonably streamlined, and provide timely, equitable land use decisions.

Policy 4.3 Utilize appropriate permits and regulations to protect the environment in a manner that fosters a prosperous and livable community.

*Goal 5 Preserve, protect and restore important historical, cultural, educational and scientific sites for public use and enjoyment.*

Policy 5.1 Adhere to relevant federal and state regulations to identify and preserve cultural and historic resources.

Policy 5.2 Protect and highlight cultural, historic, or other educational values when acquiring and developing public lands.

Policy 5.3 Coordinate with Okanogan County Historical Society, Shafer Museum, the Colville Confederated Tribes, the Yakama Nation, or other interested parties in the preservation, protection and restoration of culturally significant sites or resources.

**Goal 6** *Recognize that an economically healthy community depends on access to health care, education, telecommunications, public infrastructure and government services.*

- Policy 6.1 Ensure that local land use regulations provide good location options for health care, education, and other services that create a functional community.
- Policy 6.2 Maintain roads and utilities in good working condition.
- Policy 6.3 Support Okanogan County Transit Authority in the development of transit serving Winthrop and the Methow Valley, including bus stops and park and ride facilities at accessible locations.
- Policy 6.4 Cooperate/partner with other agencies and organizations in providing services and infrastructure that serve the economic health of the community.

### **Economic Development Initiatives**

The economic health of our community results from long standing initiatives that represent the fruit of partnerships, efforts, and investments of the Town and various community groups. Facilities such as the Barn, Mack Lloyd Park, the Visitor Information Center, and the Winthrop Ice Rink are all facilities that illustrate the value of town government working with community groups to provide facilities that help make Winthrop a lovely place and foster a more vibrant economy. The following initiatives are ongoing efforts by the Town and our partner organizations to foster a healthy economy and livable community:

- **RiverWalk** – At the drafting of this plan, the first phase of the RiverWalk is being designed. Ultimately, the plan involves connecting the SaTeekhWa Bridge at the north end of downtown with the Spring Creek Bridge on the south end via a pedestrian pathway, offering river views and access to businesses from the river side. Phase 1 will construct an ADA compliant underpass of the Chewuch River Bridge. This project will engage landowners, Methow Trails and other community partners as it moves forward.
- **Susie Stephens Trail** – With Phase 1 of the Susie Stephens Trail complete, the Town continues efforts to build a multi-use trail connecting downtown with the Highway Commercial district. SST provides a safe route of travel for pedestrians and bicyclists, diverting them from the narrow shoulders of SR 20. Many locals have contributed passionately to this trail effort.
- **Winthrop Ice Rink** – This town-owned facility is operated and maintained by the Winthrop Ice and Sports Rink non-profit organization. Efforts are underway to

refrigerate the rink so as to provide more reliable skating opportunities and bolster winter tourism.

- **Town Trailhead** – The trailhead provides parking for winter access to Methow Trails, the ice rink, and the Susie Stephens Trail. Better signage and delineation of parking could help the trailhead function for downtown satellite parking.
- **Winthrop Auditorium aka “The Barn”** – The Barn has been a central community gathering place since its construction by a group of volunteers in 1980. Owned by the Town, the facility is lovingly operated and maintained by the Winthrop Barn Association. The building hosts everything from concerts to Kiwanis meetings.
- **Welcome Gates** – A rustic “gate” welcomes travelers from the West as they arrive in Winthrop. The gate is a focal point for visitors and one of our most photographed features. While still only a vision, a gate for the entrance from the South could help enhance a “gate-to-gate Western experience.”
- **Mack Lloyd Park** - Just inside the west gate to Town, Mack Lloyd Park offers a very visible spot to picnic, walk to the River, or enjoy any of a host of events that are held in the park throughout the year. Ongoing maintenance of the park and its trees help ensure this park facility continues to be a central attraction.
- **River Access** – Despite Winthrop’s location at the confluence of the Methow and Chewuch Rivers, people cannot easily access the river for boating or other passive forms of recreation. We recognize improved river access as an opportunity to add to Winthrop’s attractiveness and livability, and thus our economic vitality.
- **Trees** – Research from many corners suggests that trees in urban settings contribute economic value to property and can attract increased business. Winthrop’s trees are mostly in parks or on private property. Caring for our existing trees and planting new trees in appropriate locations provide simple ways to enhance the beauty and economic health of our community.