

2026 UPDATE

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

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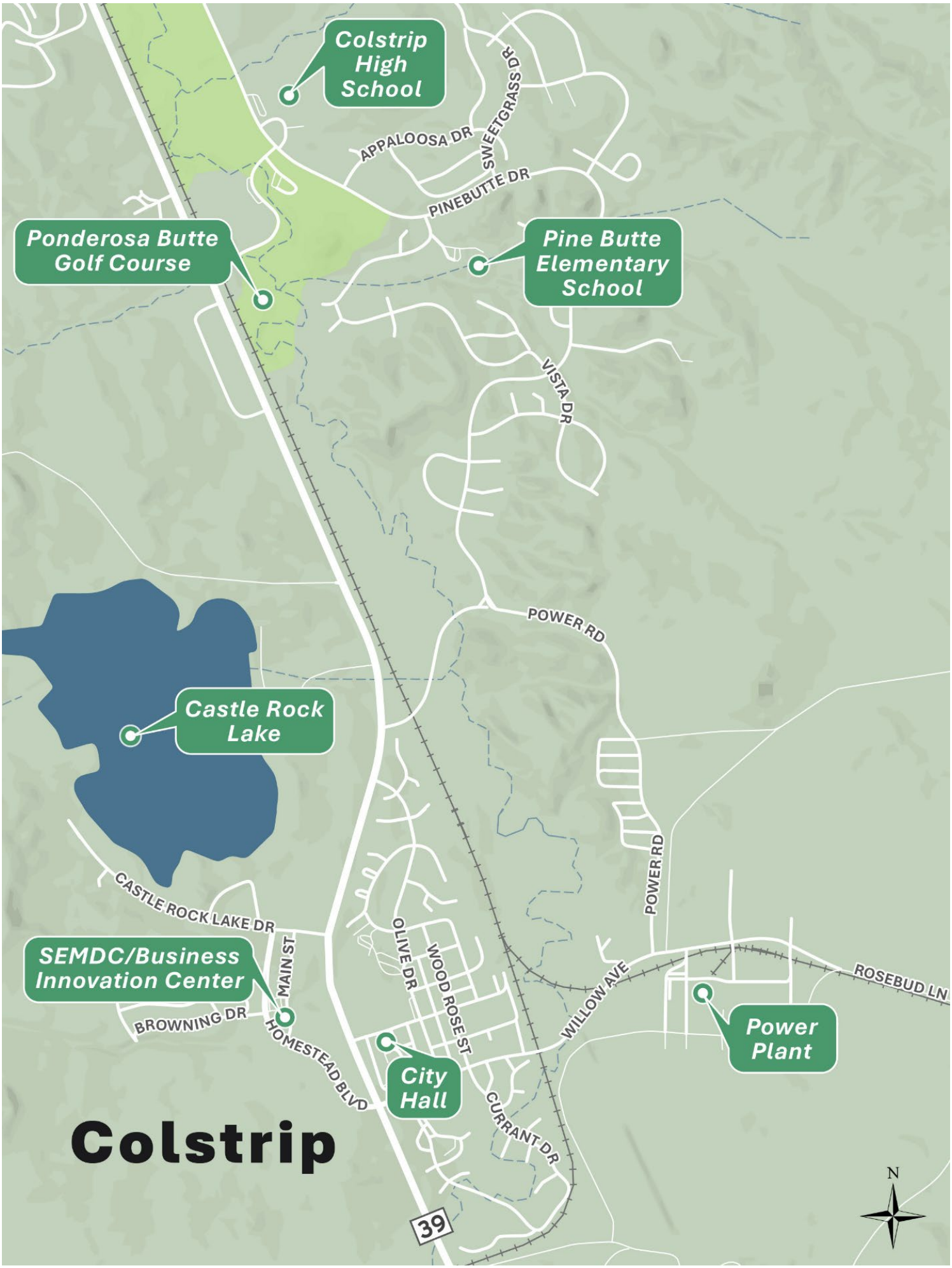

Colstrip High School
APPALOOSA DR
SWEETGRASS DR
PINEBUTTE DR
Ponderosa Butte Golf Course
Pine Butte Elementary School
VISTA DR
POWER RD
Castle Rock Lake
CASTLE ROCK LAKE DR
POWER RD
SEMDC/Business Innovation Center
MAIN ST
OLIVE DR
WOOD ROSE ST
WILLOW AVE
ROSEBUD LN
BROWNING DR
HOMESTEAD BLVD
City Hall
CURRANT DR
Power Plant
Colstrip
39
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary ***1***

Overview of Goals **3**

Diversification Strategy Progress ***3***

Goal and Project Updates **4**

Process and Approach ***8***

Inventory of Economic Development Tools **8**

Community Participation and SWOT Analysis **9**

Public Engagement (SWOT) Key Findings **10**

Strengths 10
Weaknesses/Challenges 10
Opportunities 10
Threats/Outside Impacts 11
Summary 11

Demographics and Socioeconomic Background ***12***

Economy and Workforce **13**

Innovation Capacity Profile **15**

Human Capital and Knowledge Creation Index 15
Business Dynamics Index 15
Business Profile Index 15
Employment and Productivity Index 16
Economic Well-Being Index 16

DIVERSIFICATION GOALS AND STRATEGIES ***16***

Goal 1: Energy Development and Industry Transition **17**

Goal 1 Strategies 17

Goal 2: Technology and Entrepreneurship **20**

Goal 2 Strategies 21

Goal 3: Manufacturing and Industrial Development **23**

Goal 3 Strategies 24

Goal 4: Skilled Trades and Workforce Development **27**

Goal 4 Strategies 27

Goal 5: Agriculture, Recreation, and Tourism **28**

Goal 5 Strategies 29

Goal 6: Quality of Life, Housing, and Community Development **32**

Goal 6 Strategies 32
Looking Forward 35

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ***36***

APPENDIX A: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT/SWOT ***37***

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2017, in response to growing concern about the pending closure of Units 1 and 2 of the Colstrip Power Plant, the City of Colstrip (the City), in partnership with Southeastern Montana Development Corporation (SEMDC) completed the City's first Economic Diversification Strategy. That Plan has served as a roadmap for diversification efforts since that time. Now, nearly a decade after that plan was originally completed, the City has seen substantial progress on the goals of that plan as well as changes in the political and economic landscape. This 2026 update will move the community forward again and act as a milestone for previous efforts as well as a roadmap for economic development and diversification for the next decade.

This 2026 Updated Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy remains a community-driven roadmap designed to strengthen and diversify the local economy while preserving the assets, workforce, and quality of life that define Colstrip. Since the original strategy was developed, Colstrip has continued to adapt to the ever-changing political landscape that heavily influences coal mining and coal-generated energy, while simultaneously pursuing new opportunities, infrastructure investments, business development initiatives, and emerging energy technologies. The purpose of this updated plan is to reassess community priorities, acknowledge progress made since the original plan, and identify the next generation of opportunities that can support Colstrip and long-term economic resilience.

The 2026 public survey demonstrated that residents remain optimistic about Colstrip's future. As was the case in 2017, survey participants overwhelmingly identified Colstrip's sense of community and quality of life (73.5%), parks and recreational opportunities (76.5%), and safe community environment (55.9%) as Colstrip's greatest strengths and the reason they stay in the community. Quality of life remains Colstrip's greatest competitive advantages.

At the same time, residents identified several areas that require continued attention. Like many communities throughout Montana and the country, housing continues to be a significant concern, both in terms of recruiting and retaining workforce, and as a barrier to attracting new businesses. Increased educational opportunities, business retention and expansion, access to increased/ specialized healthcare services, focus on infrastructure improvements, and increased community amenities were also identified as priorities.

Community feedback further indicates a moderate shift in economic diversification priorities since completion of the 2017 plan. While survey respondents very clearly acknowledge and support coal mining and coal-based power generation as important economic drivers, there is growing interest in leveraging Colstrip's existing infrastructure, skilled workforce, transmission capacity, and industrial assets to support emerging technologies and new energy development. Survey respondents identified value-added energy projects such as natural gas and small modular nuclear reactors, technology-related businesses, and small-scale manufacturing as some of the sectors with the greatest growth potential.

This “all of the above” approach to energy development is noteworthy. Strong support was expressed for Small Modular Reactor (SMR) development, with respondents citing economic benefits, employment stability, and long-term community sustainability as reasons for support. Despite ongoing national and state level controversy, respondents also identified data center development as a potential opportunity, though responses very clearly outlined the desire for careful evaluation of water use, land use, energy requirements, and long-term economic impacts.

Even more so than the 2017 Plan, the community, and therefore this strategy, recognizes that Colstrip's future will not be built on a single project, industry, or employer. Continued economic diversification will require a steady and balanced approach that predominantly includes goals and related activities that:

- Preserve and strengthen the existing coal-based energy economy
- Expand housing opportunities for current and future residents
- Support business retention, expansion, and entrepreneurship
- Leverage existing infrastructure to attract diverse energy industries
- Pursue advanced energy technologies, including natural gas and SMR development
- Expand healthcare, retail, restaurant, and entertainment options
- Create opportunities for workforce development and skilled trades training, and
- Maintain quality of life amenities that attract families, businesses, and investment.

Colstrip continues to embrace the community's heritage while supporting a forward-looking strategy that builds on existing strengths and work that has been done since development of the 2017 Diversification Strategy. The 2026 Economic Diversification Strategy provides a framework for achieving that vision and ensuring Colstrip remains a thriving regional center for energy, innovation, business, and community life.

Overview of Goals

Goal 1: Energy Development and Industry Transition

- Preservation and Utilization of transmission infrastructure
- Colstrip as an "energy and technology hub"
- Evaluation/development of advanced energy technologies

Goal 2: Technology and Entrepreneurship

- Development of technology services/support
- Interconnection of technology and energy development
- Data Center understanding/investigation

Goal 3: Manufacturing and Industrial Development

- Leveraging of industrial infrastructure and related workforce skills
- Development/Attraction of small manufacturing businesses
- Development of the Industrial Park

Goal 4: Skilled Trades and Workforce Development

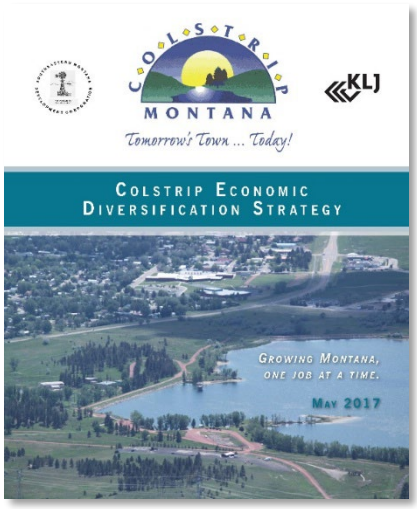
- Development/Growth and Utilization of the Business Innovation Center
- Continued support for workforce/entrepreneur development (including trades, healthcare, tech and energy sectors)

Goal 5: Agriculture, Recreation, and Tourism

- Support agriculture as an ongoing base of the regional economy
- Maintain parks and recreational opportunities as one of Colstrip's greatest assets

Goal 6: Quality of Life, Housing, and Community Development

- Address housing availability (purchase and rental development)
- Seek ways to grow businesses that specifically support entertainment, recreation, restaurants and other hospitality-related industries



DIVERSIFICATION STRATEGY PROGRESS

Since development of the original Diversification Strategy in 2017, the City and SEMDC, in partnership with several public and private partners, have undertaken significant efforts to advance the identified goals and strategies. Several bedrock projects have been successfully completed and others have advanced substantially. These accomplishments have improved the City's ability to attract investment, support existing businesses, market community assets, and position themselves for future economic opportunities.

The 2017 Diversification Strategy outlined 6 goals and 17 related strategies. While these have been updated based on community input, and emerging needs, the 2026 Strategy should be considered an extension of the original. Several of the 2017 goals remain relevant and/or require multiple phases and layered activities to be considered complete. Additionally, in several cases, while the overarching goal from the 2017 Strategy has carried over in some way, the related strategies have changed, reflecting progress since the original plan as well as the ever-changing economic and political landscape. A summary of completed projects and progress to date is provided to ensure an understanding of how the 2017 Strategy influences and impacts the 2026 Strategy.

Goal and Project Updates

The 2017 Strategy identified the following 6 goals:

- Coal, Energy and Renewable Technology
- High Tech Industry & Entrepreneurship
- Manufacturing
- High Skilled Trades
- Agriculture and Outdoor Recreation/Tourism
- Quality of Life

5 priority strategies/activities have been successfully completed as follows:

- Development of an Industrial Park Preliminary Engineering Report (PER)
- Multiple broadband installation and expansion projects
- Creation of a GIS Site Selector Program
- Development and implementation of a regional marketing campaign
- Construction of the Business Innovation Center (BIC)

Each of these completed activities, along with updates related to goal/strategy progress for each of the 2017 Strategy goals follows.

Goal 1: Coal, Energy, and Renewable Technology
This goal was focused on leveraging Colstrip's existing energy infrastructure while exploring emerging energy technologies and new value-added opportunities.

In 2023 SEMDC and its partners worked to complete four value-added energy commercialization and technical studies designed to evaluate future industrial and energy opportunities within the region. These studies advanced many of the concepts identified, including projects involving coal-based feedstocks, alternative energy generation, hydrogen production, and other energy technologies. These efforts are ongoing and an ever changing and moving target but should be considered substantially complete specific to 2017 Goal 1, Strategy 1.2: Pilot and implement full-scale emerging clean coal industry alternatives.

Several elements of Strategies 1.3 (Explore the opportunities for converting coal into petroleum products) and 1.4 (Pilot a hydrogen fuel production facility) were also advanced through the previously outlined technical studies. Multiple studies evaluated coal as a potential feedstock for new value-added products, including petroleum-related applications, hydrogen production, and graphene technologies. While no commercial project has yet been constructed, these evaluations significantly expand the understanding of future development opportunities and have led to advanced discussions related to alternative uses for existing energy resources.

There has also been substantial progress in renewable energy development. Through regional analysis and project evaluations, strong opportunities were identified for wind, solar, geothermal energy, and additional transmission-related development. As a result, while these opportunities are still under consideration for future development, Strategy 1.5 (Foster renewable energy potential) is considered substantially complete.

Workforce partnerships and educational collaborations also advanced under Strategy 1.6 (Partner with regional, accredited trade schools). Discussions and cooperative efforts involving Miles Community College, Chief Dull Knife College, the Boilermakers, and the Business Innovation Center have established a foundation for future workforce training and educational programming that supports both traditional and emerging industries moving forward.

Goal 2: High-Tech Industry and Entrepreneurship

Among all the goals identified in the original 2017 Strategy, Goal 2 achieved some of the most visible and measurable results. Completion of a major regional broadband project represents one of the strategy's greatest successes, directly addressing Strategy 2.1: Expand broadband services to increase economic, education, and innovation capacity. Broadband expansion throughout Rosebud County, and specifically in the Forsyth and Colstrip areas, involved approximately $18 million in investment and significantly improved telecommunications infrastructure throughout the region. This project directly addressed the highest-ranked priority identified during the 2017 planning process and has positioned Colstrip to compete more effectively for technology-based industries, remote work opportunities, educational offerings, and healthcare services.

The community also made progress toward attracting technology-based businesses (Strategy 2.2). Economic development efforts focused on emerging sectors including data centers, advanced chemical production, critical minerals development, and Small Modular Nuclear Reactor (SMR) opportunities. Recruitment efforts remain ongoing, and these activities reflect a strategic shift toward industries that align with Colstrip's transmission infrastructure, workforce capabilities, and industrial assets.

Perhaps the most significant accomplishment under Goal 2, was the successful development and construction of the Business Innovation Center (BIC), which was identified in Strategy 2.3 (Establish a multi-functional professional facility to support small business development and retention). This approximately 6,800-square-foot facility completed construction in 2026 and represents an investment of more than $4 million. It serves as a key economic development asset for the community, providing space and resources to support entrepreneurship, workforce development, business incubation and growth, and project development activities.

Goal 3: Manufacturing

The primary objective of Goal 3 was to build a unique manufacturing ecosystem to capitalize on existing industrial sites and infrastructure while creating sustainable, high-paying positions. Specific strategies outlined in service to this goal included possible development of a tire pelletizing plant as well as a municipal waste processing facility. Both strategies were identified through public engagement and research into similar state level diversification strategies. They were considered opportunities/examples of unique manufacturing operations that might leverage existing rail infrastructure, possible land suited to industrial uses, and existing workforce skills. While the specific projects identified in 2017 have not advanced, the broader goal of supporting manufacturing remains relevant and preliminary work has been done to advance the overall goal, including completion of the Industrial Park Preliminary Engineering Report (PER) and subsequent identification of a specific location suitable for an industrial/manufacturing park.

Goal 4: High Skilled Trades

In 2017, Colstrip was facing a series of federal regulations and rulings that were jeopardizing the viability of a significant portion of the community's electrical generation capacity by taking Units 1 and 2 off-line and potentially impacting the long-term plans for Units 3 and 4. While the consensus was that the core infrastructure surrounding the power plant would remain an asset moving forward, there was growing concern that closures would result in the loss of hundreds of high-skill, high-wage jobs. Goal 4 was a direct response to that threat and strategies were targeted specifically to redeployment of existing human resources. Based on public engagement and information about what industries might be most needed and had wages moderately comparable to those at the power plant, Strategy 4.1 suggested development of a highway construction staffing, supply, and service center.

Like the strategies outlined in Goal 3, the strategy outlined in Goal 4 was not advanced. This was in part because the closure of Units 1 and 2 did not have the workforce impact originally anticipated. Most of the workforce assigned to those Units were redeployed to Units 3 and 4, while some retired or moved into demolition, remediation, and environmental cleanup work associated with Units 1 and 2. The result was a less immediate need to redeploy workforce, and a longer term need to continue to consider ways in which to train and support entrepreneurs, business incubation, and broader technical/trades workforce development. These activities will be supported by the BIC moving forward.



Goal 5: Agriculture and Outdoor Recreation/Tourism
Although many of the specific agricultural strategies identified in the 2017 Strategy were not pursued, progress was made in regional marketing and community promotion. A regional branding and marketing initiative, ***Montana Made Possible*** was developed to enhance awareness of southeastern Montana and promote the region's economic development opportunities, quality of life, workforce strengths, and business advantages.
This effort contributed to both tourism promotion and broader economic development objectives outlined in Strategy 5.1 (Promote agri/eco/geo-tourism throughout Rosebud County).

Goal 6: Quality of Life
The regional marketing effort also directly supported Goal 6, Strategy 6.1 (Develop a marketing campaign to attract young professionals and families to Colstrip). Through the ***Montana Made Possible*** campaign, the community enhanced its ability to market Colstrip as a place to live, work, invest, and raise a family. The campaign reinforced many of the quality-of-life advantages that continue to be identified as strengths by residents, including outdoor recreation, community amenities, safety, and educational opportunities.

Work under Strategy 6.2 (Provide housing and transportation options for retired and disabled members of the community) continues to be one of the most important ongoing challenges facing the community: housing availability. While significant housing construction has not yet occurred, the issue has become one of the highest priorities identified in both community discussions and the 2026 survey responses. This goal continues to be a priority, not just for seniors and disabled members of the community as outlined in the 2017 Strategy, but for all residents and businesses.

Building the Foundation for the Next Phase of Diversification
While not every strategy or project envisioned in 2017 was completed, the original strategy successfully established the framework that guided significant investments and economic development activities over the past decade. The completion of broadband infrastructure improvements, creation of the Business Innovation Center, implementation of regional marketing initiatives, advancement of value-added energy studies, development of site selection tools, and continued exploration of emerging energy technologies collectively demonstrate substantial, meaningful progress

Most importantly, these efforts have positioned Colstrip to capitalize on future opportunities involving advanced energy development, technology industries, workforce training, support of entrepreneurs, housing investment, and business recruitment. These accomplishments provide a strong foundation on which the next generation of economic diversification initiatives can be built.

PROCESS AND APPROACH

As a regional economic development group, SEMDC participates in a variety of planning activities within their four-county region. The City of Colstrip also continues to strategically plan for community development and infrastructure needs. Together, with federal support from EDA, USDA, and SBA, and various Montana economic development resources, Colstrip has a substantial inventory of economic development tools and resources available.



Inventory of Economic Development Tools

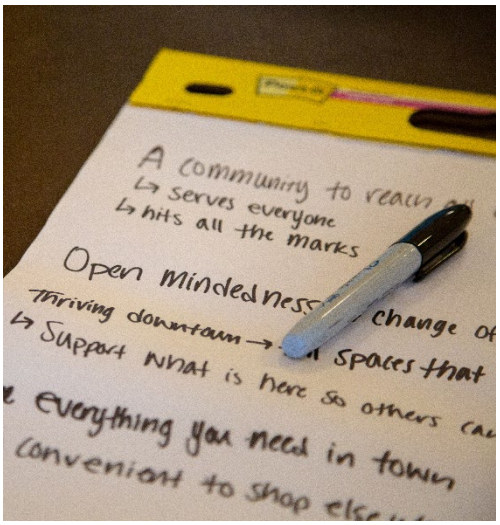
Strategies that diversify the local economy are only part of the economic development puzzle. SEMDC has a long history of working in partnership with the City, industry leaders, regional economic development partners, neighboring communities and the state to assess what economic and cultural drivers are most effective locally as well as regionally. A review of past economic development work, and community planning documents provided an understanding of the City's historic, cultural, economic, and infrastructure development to date. Recognition and understanding of these are critical when looking forward to diversification strategies that may be effective moving forward. The following resources and documents were considered as part of the review.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS): This EDA-approved, regional plan is led by SEMDC and leverages regional partnerships and resources to strengthen the economy in southeastern Montana. SEMDC facilitates up to 7 annual public input update sessions/surveys with each community in the CEDS region, including Colstrip. These meetings also result in the SEMDC Infrastructure Needs List, which documents specific infrastructure needs/projects in Colstrip and the surrounding area.

Rosebud County and City of Colstrip Growth Policies: Both Rosebud County and the City of Colstrip updated their growth policies in 2025. These plans are utilized to assist both the City and County in outlining their vision for the future and guide decision-making about land use and development. The City of Colstrip has embraced a proactive economic and community mindset captured in its official slogan "Tomorrow's Town Today." Their Growth Policy reflects that mindset and is a companion document to the Diversification Strategy.

State of Montana: The State has many resources, primarily through the Department of Commerce and the Governor's Office of Economic Development. These resources include technical assistance, grant, and loan resources that can be utilized to support economic development, diversification, and provide support for existing businesses.

Montana Economic Developers' Association (MEDA): SEMDC is a member of MEDA, a state level agency that strengthens Montana's communities and economic development through education, advocacy, and collaboration. MEDA comprises over 150 economic development practitioners, all of whom are working to advance development through business creation, expansion, retention, and diversification of the state's economic base.



Community Participation and SWOT Analysis

The City and SEMDC have been actively engaging the community at various levels regarding economic development and diversification efforts since development of the original Strategy in 2017. SEMDC conducts annual community meetings throughout the region, garnering public input on economic development and infrastructure needs as part of their CEDS development and updates. In addition, Colstrip residents recently participated in an extensive national survey being conducted by BYU (results of which will be available later in 2026).

Because of these ongoing efforts and input gathered both by BYU and the CEDS update meetings, public engagement efforts for the updated diversification strategy were minimized. This ensured that there was not a duplication of effort, but that the public continued to have an opportunity to contribute to the goals and objectives moving forward. There were no public meetings held, but instead a short public survey was distributed (available both in hard copy and on-line) for a period of four weeks.

Survey results indicate that residents continue to view Colstrip's greatest strengths as its strong sense of community, quality of life, parks and recreation assets, and overall safety. Housing was identified as the community's most pressing challenge and the single greatest barrier to future economic growth. The community generally supports economic diversification efforts, particularly those focused on energy development (including natural gas and small modular nuclear reactors), housing development, increased restaurants and entertainment, specialized healthcare services, and technology-related industries. Respondents also expressed concern about population decline (in Colstrip but also rural communities in general), workforce availability, commercial real estate shortages, and the need for expanded business opportunities.

Public Engagement (SWOT) Key Findings

Strengths

Survey respondents overwhelmingly identified parks and recreational opportunities (76%), sense of community/quality of life (73%), and safety (56%) as Colstrip's greatest strengths. Additionally, 15% of respondents indicated they believed Colstrip had a strong local economy.

Weaknesses/Challenges

As previously indicated, housing continues to be the greatest identified challenge (76% of respondents listed this as the number one challenge). In addition, educational opportunities (41%) and business retention/expansion challenges (38%) rose to the top of the list. Healthcare access, infrastructure improvements, and increased opportunities for entertainment/increased amenities (all at 30%) were identified.

Opportunities

Despite significant concerns expressed during the development of the 2017 Diversification Strategy specifically related to industry, workforce and population decline, Colstrip continues to thrive through support of their core industries, such as coal and coal-fired power generation, and embracing new ideas and technologies. This is especially true pertaining to energy technologies and value-added energy opportunities. 59% of survey respondents indicated these industries had the strongest growth/diversification potential. Given results related to community challenges, it should come as no surprise that housing (62%), additional restaurants and other amenities (41%) and healthcare services (27%) also rose to the top as ongoing opportunities for diversification and growth. Manufacturing and value-added agricultural growth (23% and 21% respectively) were also included in the list of ongoing opportunities for economic growth and diversification.

The most requested types of businesses/businesses to grow for better quality of life and economic diversification were restaurants and related establishments (44%), entertainment and recreation (38%), specialized healthcare providers (32%), retail/service businesses (29%), and technology/energy-related businesses (27%).

Threats/Outside Impacts

While the current federal administration has been significantly more supportive of extraction industries, including coal, as well as coal-fired energy, residents of Colstrip clearly understand that this is a moving and changing landscape. Long term, the steady decline of the coal and coal-fired power market will continue to be a legitimate threat for Colstrip. For this reason, especially since the development of the 2017 Strategy, residents have embraced the "all of the above" mentality, strongly supporting the continued investigation and development of additional energy industry opportunities. Colstrip is uniquely positioned with significant core infrastructure and a highly skilled workforce that strongly supports the opportunity for alternative/emerging energy production and transmission, and this is reflected in ongoing diversification opportunities.

Related to potential threats to coal and coal-fired energy, residents in Colstrip specifically identified the loss of tax base associated with changing energy markets, and environmental and regulatory uncertainties affecting development. Outside those directly related threats, continued population decline, and difficulty attracting workforce were noted.

Summary

A clear theme throughout survey responses is that Colstrip residents want to maintain the community's quality of life while continuing to create new economic opportunities that can sustain population, workforce, and tax base as the region continues to diversify beyond traditional coal related industries. Colstrip's strengths continue to lie in the community character, recreational amenities, and safe environment which are competitive advantages. Housing continues to be the dominant challenge, both in terms of new business development and recruitment of workforce, and there continues to be a desire to increase retail, food/beverage, and service industry availability in the community. Residents support ongoing diversification efforts, especially in energy development specifically for natural gas and nuclear generation and transmission. They are also supportive of investments in technology and manufacturing that support these industries or as stand-alone business and workforce development initiatives.

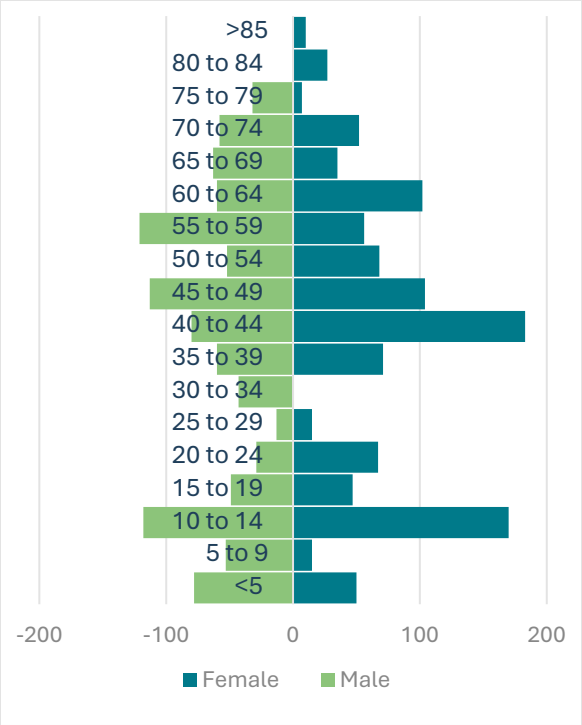
Given the current national and state level discussion about the role of data centers in economic development, the survey also included questions specific to these as an economic driver. Unsurprisingly, responses were mixed with approximately 31% of respondents indicating they believed data centers would be a positive economic driver and the remaining 69% indicating they would not. When the follow-up question was asked to the basis of that opinion, concerns about land use were most significant (28%), followed by water use (21%) and energy use (8%). As has been the case across the country, both the positive and negative implications of data center development will remain under consideration but is not currently fully supported as a primary economic diversification strategy.

Overall, survey results suggest a community that remains optimistic about its future, possesses strong community assets, and is broadly supportive of strategic economic diversification, if housing, workforce, and quality-of-life amenities are addressed alongside economic diversification initiatives. As the Executive Director of SEMDC, Jim Atchison, regularly says, “Colstrip is not closing.”

DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND

The population of Colstrip declined between 2010 and 2020, dropping more than 5%, from 2,214 to 2,096. During that same decade, the population of Montana grew almost 10%.[1] But the city’s population decline may have come to an end: the most recent estimates for 2024 put Colstrip’s population at 2,101, hinting that the state of Montana’s continued growth could present an opportunity for Colstrip.

Figure 1: Colstrip Population Age Graph



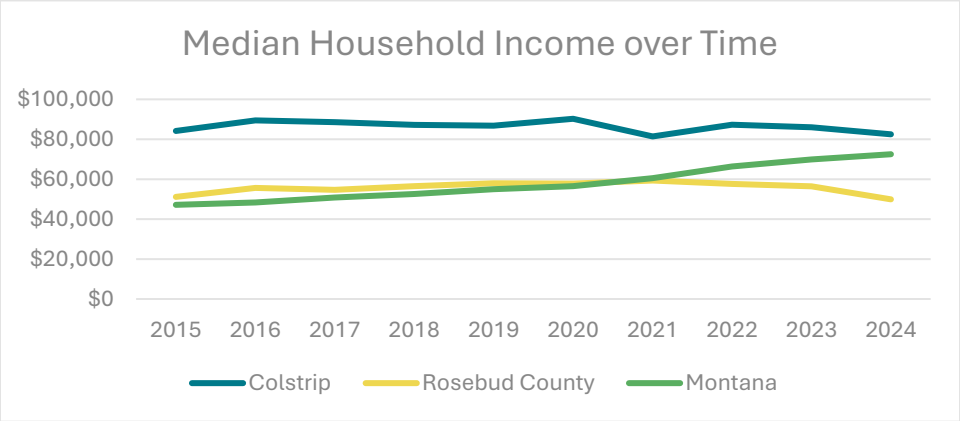
Compared to the state of Montana, the population of Colstrip is older and only slightly more female, with a median age of 44.2 (3.8 years higher than the statewide average) with approximately 95 males for every female resident (6 fewer than the statewide average). Age dependency ratio is a measure of the number of dependents (elderly people and children) for every working-age adult. While the overall ratio of 0.686 is like the statewide average of 0.699, despite the city’s older population, dependents in Colstrip are more likely to be children than elderly people. This speaks to the community’s relatively large number of middle-aged adults, many of whom have children. Almost 45% of the City’s population is between the ages of 40 and 64, compared to just 30% of all Montanans.[2]

Colstrip has a higher median income than the state overall. The median household income in Colstrip is estimated at $82,500, considerably higher than the statewide average of $72,509, and much higher than the Rosebud County average of $49,914. Reflective of the average wages at the power plant and mine, almost 47% of households were estimated to earn over $100,000, compared with 35% statewide.

[1] 2010 and 2020 Decennial Census
[2] Table S0101 Age and Sex, 2024 ACS 5-year estimates

Wage growth has looked different in and around Colstrip than in Montana as a whole. While Colstrip may enjoy higher incomes on average, the median has stagnated and even declined, having reached a high of approximately $90,000 in 2020. Rosebud County has also seen a considerable decrease in household income since 2020 and has fallen well below the statewide average. This is all while incomes around Montana have grown impressively. The state's recent economic increases have largely missed Colstrip and its surrounding areas. While there is no singular or definitive reason for this, there is reason to believe this may have something to do with a small decline in power plant and/or mine workers since the closure of Units 1 & 2 as well as a decline in agricultural related income/revenues.

Figure 2: Median Household Income 2015-2024[3]



Economy and Workforce

The US Census differentiates between occupations and industries. The former describes the function of the individual's job, regardless of industry, whereas industry describes the type of business activity of the employer. Workers in Colstrip are comparatively likely to work in natural resource occupations, with 23.4% of the City's workforce being employed in these jobs, compared to 11.8% in Montana overall. Over two-thirds of these workers are employed in construction and extraction occupations, with the remainder employed in installation, maintenance, and repair.

Workers in Colstrip are also comparatively likely to work in production (10.3% versus 3.9% statewide), law enforcement (2.5% versus 0.8%), and healthcare support (6% versus 3.1%).

The single largest macro-occupation in Colstrip is management, business, science, and the arts, with 32.4% of workers in the City employed in this field. This is a lower rate than Montana overall, where that proportion tops 40%. Other occupations relatively underrepresented in Colstrip include sales (2.1% versus 9% statewide), personal care services (0.9% versus 2.6%), and transportation (3.6% statewide, and none in Colstrip).

[3] ACS 5-year estimates, 2015 through 2024

The top three industries that employ Colstrip residents are mining, quarrying, and oil and natural gas extraction (17.6% of workers), utilities (14%), and educational services (13.2%). As for employers located within Colstrip, the top three industries are utilities (30% of jobs), educational services (18.1%), and construction (17.7%). Notably, none of the jobs in mining, quarrying, and oil and natural gas extraction are located within Colstrip city limits.[4]

According to the US Census OnTheMap 2023 estimates, Colstrip has slightly more jobs (869) than workers (835), meaning more people commute into Colstrip than out of it. It is estimated that there are 519 inbound and 485 outbound commuters each day, with 350 people both living and working in town. Over 75% of people working in Colstrip live within Rosebud County, with the next-most (7.4%) coming from Yellowstone County (Billings). It is much more common for workers *from* Colstrip to commute *to* Yellowstone County, with 16.3% doing so, and just over half staying within Rosebud County.

Workers in Colstrip are overwhelmingly likely (89.1%) to drive alone to work. Compared to the rest of Montana, workers are less likely to carpool, walk, or use other means such as bicycles, and none reported using public transportation. (Public transportation, or the lack of it, was identified as a "challenge" in the 2017 Strategy, but not in the 2026 update). Moreover, only 2.6% reported working from home, a rate that is barely 1/5 of the rate of workers throughout Montana (12.5%). (This is a reduction in reported at-home workers from the 2017 Strategy.)

Most of the county's largest employers are connected to the energy industry, such as through coal mining (Westmoreland), electricity generation and distribution (Talen, CEI), and providing services like operations and maintenance (North American Energy Services, Rosebud Operating Services). There are also many jobs within healthcare, education, and construction.

Top Employers

In 2024, the largest employers in Rosebud County[5] were identified as:

BUSINESS NAME	EMPLOYMENT RANGE	INDUSTRY
North American Energy Services	250 to 499 Employees	Energy
Talen Montana	250 to 499 Employees	Energy
Westmoreland Mining	250 to 499 Employees	Energy
CEI Electrical Contractors	100 to 249 Employees	Energy
Rosebud Health Care Center	100 to 249 Employees	Healthcare
St. Labre Indian School	100 to 249 Employees	Education
Prince, Inc.	50 to 99 Employees	Construction
Town Pump, Inc.	50 to 99 Employees	Retail
Range Telephone Cooperative Inc.	20 to 49 Employees	Telecommunications
Rosebud Operating Services, Inc.	20 to 49 Employees	Energy

[4] US Census OnTheMap, 2023 data
[5] Montana Department of Labor & Industry

Innovation Capacity Profile

StatsAmerica releases the "Innovation Intelligence Index," a measure of the relative capacity of a given geography to drive innovation. As of the latest release in 2023, Rosebud County is ranked 3,022 out of 3,144 counties nationwide in this metric, putting it in the 3rd percentile; lower than when this metric was reported in the 2017 Strategy (at which time the county was in the 27th percentile). This number is aggregated from five sub-indices, summarized as follows:

Human Capital and Knowledge Creation Index

This index summarizes educational attainment, research and technological innovation, as well as specifically STEM education and related opportunities. Colstrip's remote location is a factor in this index, as communities that have, or are in communities, that have research universities, generally rank in the highest percentile. Rosebud County's biggest strengths within this category include the percentage of adults with some college or an associate's degree. Where the index shows challenges is in a low level of university-based knowledge spillovers, which is calculated based on university research and development spending located nearby. The County also has low to moderate prime working-age population growth, ranking in the 7th percentile of counties in terms of human capital and knowledge creation.

Business Dynamics Index

This index accounts for business formation and churn in local markets, which are associated with high levels of competition. Rosebud County has seen growth in the number of new businesses in general. There is, however, a decrease in the number of businesses among trade or export industries, which are often primary drivers of a local economy. Rosebud County ranks in the 5th percentile of American counties in terms of business dynamics. Given Colstrip's generally higher median income, there is potential to increase the levels of venture capital investment.

Business Profile Index

The Business Profile Index measures local business conditions and resources available to entrepreneurs and businesses. Both national and foreign measures for investment are relevant to this index as these sometimes demonstrate that the region is more "business friendly." This is the weakest sub-index for Rosebud County, with virtually no venture capital money coming in nor foreign direct investment (FDI), a change from the previous CEDS when Rosebud County performed in the top third of countries in terms of FDI. Rosebud County ranks in the 2nd percentile of American counties, however, remains a strong candidate for national and foreign direct investment based on the commodity markets of mining, energy, and power transmission, as well as infrastructure and human resources that support these markets.

Employment and Productivity Index

This index measures industry performance, gross domestic product (GDP), patents, and job growth. The County ranks relatively high in terms of industry cluster strength and patent diversity, but low in latent innovation and high-tech industry employment. Rosebud County ranks in the 17th percentile of American counties in terms of positive outcomes from existing economic activity.

Economic Well-Being Index

Finally, this index measures aspects of internet access, per capita personal income growth, and migration. Rosebud ranks relatively highly in terms of wage growth and broadband adoption, but has low net migration, indicating that more people are leaving that coming into the county. The county ranks in the 24th percentile of American counties in terms of standard of living, primarily based on a higher-than-average median income (44% higher than the median household income of Montana).

DIVERSIFICATION GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Diversification goals and strategies are the result of synthesized data and input collected from Colstrip's survey, (which was disbursed and collected for a 4-week period in July of 2026), along with guidance from SEMDC, industry experts, and case studies from across the United States. Goals are designed to give direction to SEMDC and the City, while still being flexible enough to react to the ever changing local, regional, national, and international demands and opportunities.

There is no silver bullet or one-size-fits-all solutions when it comes to economic development and diversification. The solution to the economic shifts in Colstrip will be ever-changing and multi-faceted and will continue to include active community, regional, state, and industry involvement. Diversification strategies are living documents, so it is not surprising that not every project from the 2017 Strategy was prioritized or completed. Some of these became irrelevant or less immediate based on multiple factors, including the opportunity for many of the workers from Units 1 and 2 being able to successfully transition to similar jobs within the power plant. This resulted in a less immediate need to train and employ a highly specific and trained workforce in other areas.

While there have been subtle changes in priorities, the 2026 survey indicated that many of the 2017 goals remain similar to those in 2017. Work between the development of that strategy and now has addressed multiple priority projects and resulted in additional planning documents and information critical to the ability to continue to move those goals forward. And while community priorities and direction have evolved, housing development, emerging energy technologies, healthcare expansion, workforce development, technology infrastructure, and small business growth remain important and critical to ongoing economic development and diversification.

Following are the identified goals and related strategies recommended to continue to capitalize on existing and potential resources in the Colstrip area that support economic diversity, sustainability and growth.



Goal 1: Energy Development and Industry Transition

Economic diversification efforts over the past decade have continued to build upon Colstrip's established energy infrastructure and skilled workforce. While maintaining support for traditional coal generation and mining, the community has increasingly focused on opportunities involving advanced energy technologies. Key accomplishments that have set the stage for continued diversification in this area include:

- Preservation and continued utilization of Colstrip's core transmission infrastructure
- Regional and growing national recognition of Colstrip's potential as an energy and technology hub,
- Active evaluation and feasibility/planning for advanced energy technologies, including SMRs and natural gas generation, and
- Increased engagement with developers exploring large-scale industrial and energy projects.

The strongest area of community support identified in the 2026 survey was for continued planning and development of diversified and emerging energy production and value-added energy industries and projects. Nearly 59% of respondents identified natural gas and nuclear energy opportunities as having significant potential for future growth. Survey participants also expressed strong support for Small Modular Reactor (SMR) development, with economic benefits identified as the primary justification. This represents an evolution from the 2017 Strategy's primary focus on clean coal, coal conversion, and hydrogen technologies toward a broader energy diversification framework that may include those technologies but also supports a wider lens and increased, more diverse opportunities.

Colstrip is uniquely positioned to take advantage of a variety of emerging energy technologies and related businesses, largely because major energy infrastructure, including transmission lines, rail access, water resources, and an experienced workforce already exists.

Goal 1 Strategies

1.1: Advance Small Modular Reactor (SMR) Readiness and Development:
Community support for SMRs is strong and Colstrip's existing infrastructure and workforce are a competitive advantage.

Tasks

- Continuing feasibility analysis, site characterization, and infrastructure assessments that support future SMR deployment,
- Continue pursuing partnerships with reactor developers, utilities, national laboratories, universities, and federal agencies,
- Promote Colstrip as the premier "coal-to-nuclear transition" location in Montana,

- Develop workforce transition and training programs that prepare existing energy workers for future nuclear careers, and
- Support community education and public engagement efforts regarding advanced nuclear technologies.

1.2: Expand Natural Gas Generation Opportunities: Survey respondents identified natural gas as one of the most promising growth opportunities. Natural gas is also a possible bridge technology during energy transition.

Tasks

- Evaluate opportunities for flexible natural gas generation that complements renewable resources and supports grid reliability,
- Pursue infrastructure planning necessary to accommodate future natural gas facilities,
- Encourage projects that can utilize existing electrical transmission capacity, and
- Explore combined heat and power (CHP) applications serving industrial users.

1.3: Actively Recruit Large Energy-Intensive Industries: Colstrip's transmission capacity and industrial infrastructure are a significant asset and can be used to attract major energy industry employers. While the community had mixed responses regarding data centers, these are included in the potential sectors that would be attracted to Colstrip and potentially contribute to the local workforce and related economy.

Tasks

- Market Colstrip's available power infrastructure to industries with substantial energy demands,
- Target sectors such as data centers, artificial intelligence and cloud computing facilities, advanced manufacturing, critical minerals processing, agricultural processing, and energy storage manufacturing,
- Develop incentive packages and shovel-ready industrial sites.

1.4: Develop a Regional Energy and Technology Hub: Colstrip is increasingly recognized at the regional and national level as the Montana energy hub, ideal for advanced energy development.

Tasks

- Position Colstrip as a center for innovation, demonstration, and deployment of emerging energy technologies,
- Actively recruit research, testing, and pilot projects,
- Advertise and support the BIC as a business incubator and place for innovation partnerships focused on energy technologies, and
- Create a long-term "Energy Innovation District" strategy.

1.5: Promote Value-Added Energy Industries: Value-added industries create additional jobs and economic activity beyond energy/power generation.

Tasks

- Pursue businesses that utilize energy resources for manufacturing and industrial production.
- Explore opportunities related to hydrogen production, synthetic fuels, carbon utilization, chemical manufacturing, critical mineral processing from coal ash, and energy storage technologies
- Support private-sector innovation and pilot projects.

1.6: Leverage Existing Transmission Infrastructure: The existing transmission infrastructure is one of Colstrip's most valuable economic assets and provides a distinct competitive advantage from other Montana and regional communities.

Tasks

- Preserve and maximize the use of existing transmission assets,
- Market available transmission capacity as a competitive advantage for new energy and industrial projects,
- Support projects that increase utilization of existing grid infrastructure, and
- Continue to coordinate with utilities and regional transmission organizations to identify future opportunities.

1.7: Pursue Carbon Management and Advanced Energy Technologies: These technologies complement both existing and future energy assets and like natural gas, are ways in which to take advantage of the ever-changing energy landscape.

Tasks

- Continue evaluating carbon capture, utilization, and storage (CCUS) technologies,
- Monitor opportunities related to clean coal innovations, hydrogen production, and industrial decarbonization,
- Support pilot and demonstration projects that leverage existing energy infrastructure, and
- Pursue state and federal funding opportunities for emerging technologies.

1.8: Create an Industrial Recruitment and Site Development Program: Recently SEMDC and the City have identified a potential industrial development site. This is the first step in increasing developer interest that will create additional opportunities and new public/private investments.

Tasks

- Complete infrastructure planning and environmental due diligence to create shovel-ready locations,
- Develop marketing materials highlighting Colstrip's workforce, infrastructure, and energy advantages, and
- Build relationships with site selectors, developers, utilities, and state economic development organizations.

1.9 Build Strategic Partnerships for Long-Term Transition: Successful energy and transitional industry efforts require long term relationship building and ongoing coordination among multiple stakeholders. Like many projects, this requires careful and ongoing feasibility and planning work that establishes a framework for long-term transitional activities.

Tasks

- Continue and formalize collaborations with utilities, state agencies, tribal governments, federal agencies, developers, and economic development organizations,
- Pursue private-public partnerships and related MOUs,
- Coordinate regional energy development efforts across southeastern Montana, and
- Continue advocacy efforts for policies that support responsible energy diversification while maintaining energy reliability,
- Continue partnerships with higher education institutions and organized labor unions and organizations,
- Continue to work with state and federal congressional delegates to pursue policies and financial support that support energy development and industry transitions.

Goal 2: Technology and Entrepreneurship

In 2017, expanding broadband infrastructure and attracting technology-based companies represented perhaps the most important identified strategic priority. This resulted in an investment of $18 million in broadband projects in the Rosebud County area, including Colstrip. Since that time, telecommunications and technology development have become even more important in ensuring communities not just in Montana, but nationally, remain economically viable and competitive.

The increase in remote/hybrid workers as well as the ever-increasing use of technology in everyday life, put digital access and infrastructure in the same category as roads, bridges, and drinking water. For Colstrip, since 2017, the focus has shifted from basic broadband expansion toward positioning Colstrip as a location capable of supporting modern technology industries and large industrial loads.

The emergence of data center opportunities has also significantly expanded this discussion. While community perspectives both in Colstrip and throughout Montana remain mixed, there were some community survey respondents (approximately 33%) that indicated support for, at a minimum, evaluating data center development as a potential economic driver 26.5% identified technology services among desired future business sectors. Technology and energy development are increasingly viewed as interconnected economic opportunities, and for that reason, it will be important to consider the ways in which technology continues to impact remote and rural location, as well as locations with strong energy sectors, such as Colstrip.

Goal 2 Strategies

2.1: Position Colstrip as a Rural Technology and Innovation Hub: Based on significant investments in broadband infrastructure in the past 10 years, Colstrip has progressed beyond basic broadband deployment and now can position the community as a competitive location for technology-driven industries.

Tasks

- Market Colstrip as a location that combines telecommunications infrastructure with reliable energy resources/infrastructure,
- Promote the community as a destination for technology-enabled businesses seeking lower operating costs and high quality of life,
- Build a brand around Colstrip as the emerging rural innovation center in southeastern Montana, and
- Support regional partnerships that strengthen Colstrip's visibility within Montana's technology ecosystem.

2.2 Explore the Potential of Data Centers and Related Digital Infrastructure Investments: Data center development represents the growing intersection between technology and energy development. While this remains an often-contested approach, survey results combined with national trends would support, at a minimum, the exploration of the feasibility of data center and related digital infrastructure investments.

Tasks

- Evaluate opportunities for data centers, cloud-computing facilities, and other large-scale digital infrastructure projects,
- Market Colstrip's available energy capacity, transmission infrastructure, broadband assets, and industrial land to prospective developers,
- Proactively develop community standards and evaluation criteria to assess data center proposals and maximize local economic benefits, and
- Explore opportunities for edge-computing and smaller-scale digital infrastructure facilities.

2.3 Support Entrepreneurship and Small Business Innovation: Economic diversification is often successfully achieved through smaller “wins” (base hits) and growth of locally owned businesses rather than through large projects (home runs). The construction of the BIC was a major success that was originally identified in the 2017 Strategy. Completion of that project positions Colstrip perfectly to better support entrepreneurship and small businesses.

Tasks

- Expand programs that assist entrepreneurs in launching and growing technology-enabled businesses,
- Provide mentoring, technical assistance, and business planning resources,
- Promote entrepreneurship in sectors such as software services, consulting, digital marketing, online retail, and professional services, and
- Encourage youth entrepreneurship and innovation programs.



2.4: Develop Remote Work and Digital Workforce Initiatives: The increase in remote and hybrid work/workers has significantly expanded economic opportunities, especially in rural communities with strong broadband infrastructure. While in-home workers decreased slightly from the 2017 Strategy, this remains a viable option for community growth.

Tasks

- Market Colstrip as a desirable location for remote and hybrid workers,
- Develop programs that attract remote professionals and entrepreneurs seeking affordable communities with modern connectivity, and
- Promote relocation opportunities to individuals working in technology, professional services, and creative industries.

2.5: Foster Energy Technology and Industrial Innovation: Colstrip's energy assets create opportunities that very few other rural communities in Montana or in neighboring states can offer. This competitive advantage offers significant opportunities to marry energy technology with industrial innovations.

Tasks

- Encourage businesses that operate at the intersection of technology and energy,
- Support pilot projects involving smart grid technologies, energy monitoring systems, industrial automation, energy management software, and artificial intelligence applications for energy operations, and
- Promote partnerships with utilities, energy developers, and research institutions.

2.6: Encourage Technology Adoption by Existing Businesses: While economic diversification often includes recruitment of new businesses into the community, it also requires helping existing businesses evolve and grow to meet the ever-changing landscape of the community and technology. The BIC is uniquely positioned to assist existing businesses to identify and address technology deficits that would allow them to maintain and grow their businesses to better serve their employees and their customers.

Tasks

- Provide resources that help existing businesses utilize digital tools and technologies,
- Support modernization efforts involving E-commerce, digital marketing, cloud computing, automation, artificial intelligence and productivity tools, and
- Promote technology upgrades that improve competitiveness and efficiency.

2.7: Expand Digital Infrastructure and Future-Proof Connectivity: As previously noted, reliable digital infrastructure has become as foundational to economic and community development as transportation and utility infrastructure. While there have been significant investments in this area in the past 10 years, the ever changing technology and user needs requires continued efforts to maintain connectivity and ensure digital access that supports businesses and quality of life.

Tasks

- Continue investments that improve broadband capacity, reliability, and redundancy,
- Support emerging technologies and communications infrastructure needed by future industries,
- Monitor infrastructure needs associated with data centers, advanced manufacturing, and technology-intensive employers, and
- Advocate for continued state and federal investment in rural digital infrastructure.

2.8: Build Strategic Partnerships with Educational and Research Institutions: Strong partnership often accelerates innovation and attracts investment at a community, county, and regional level. Colstrip and SEMDC have a history of successful partnerships that should be continued and built upon moving forward.

Tasks

- Collaborate with universities, community colleges, and research organizations,
- Pursue technology demonstration, workforce training, and applied research opportunities,
- Connect entrepreneurs and businesses with technical expertise and innovation resources, and
- Support initiatives that increase access to STEM education and technology careers, including makers' spaces and entrepreneurial centers.

Goal 3: Manufacturing and Industrial Development

The 2017 Strategy proposed several manufacturing strategies and projects intended to leverage Colstrip's infrastructure and workforce skills. While some of the specific projects identified in 2017 have not advanced, the broader goal of supporting manufacturing remains relevant. 2026 survey respondents continue to identify manufacturing and industrial businesses as viable diversification opportunities. 23.5% of survey respondents selected manufacturing as an industry with future growth potential and supported development of small manufacturing businesses.

While there are multiple manufacturing and industrial businesses that can and should be considered, construction, fabrication, welding, and industrial services remain consistent with the community's workforce strengths. Additionally, recruitment efforts will likely focus on projects that complement emerging energy development and leverage existing industrial infrastructure.

Goal 3 Strategies

3.1: Recruit Energy-Related Manufacturing and Industrial Projects: Similarly to the intersection of technology and energy, manufacturing opportunities are increasingly interconnected with energy. These can create mutually reinforcing economic benefits that are a natural fit for Colstrip.

Tasks

- Target manufacturers and industrial users that benefit specifically from proximity to energy generation, transmission infrastructure, and industrial land,
- Prioritize businesses that complement emerging energy development initiatives, including natural gas, advanced nuclear, carbon management, critical minerals from coals ash, and energy storage projects,
- Market Colstrip as an energy-intensive industrial location with long-term growth potential, and
- Develop recruitment materials emphasizing available infrastructure, workforce capabilities, and strategic location.

3.2: Support Industrial Site Readiness and Development: This strategy was also outlined and detailed in Goal 1, Strategy 1.9 in relation to creation of industrial sites directly related to energy technology and adjacent development. This reflects the significant overlap in energy, manufacturing, and industrial technology and the respective needs of those industries. SEMDC and the City recently identified a potential industrial development site. The use of that site, or additionally identified sites, will undoubtedly evolve and be dependent on what type of businesses show interest in developing. Regardless of the ultimate use of industrial sites, development of those locations to create "business ready" locations remains a critical piece of attracting developers.

Tasks

- Continue to identify and prepare industrial sites suitable for manufacturing, fabrication, warehousing, and processing activities,
- Invest in infrastructure improvements that increase site readiness and related competitiveness,
- Complete planning, environmental assessments, and due diligence necessary to create shovel-ready industrial properties, and
- Maintain/update the inventory of available industrial sites and facilities for prospective investors/developers.

3.3 Expand Construction, Fabrication, and Welding Industries: These industries are most closely aligned with Colstrip's existing workforce and expertise but are also in high/increased demand nationwide. Alongside expansion of learning and employment opportunities related to technology, these trades allow for increased workforce success and ability to enter the workforce quickly and effectively. These trades also typically have livable wages, encouraging people to stay in the community if these jobs are available.

Tasks

- Support growth of businesses specializing in welding, steel fabrication, industrial construction, equipment repair, and related trades,
- Encourage development of businesses capable of serving energy projects, industrial facilities, and regional infrastructure needs,
- Promote workforce training and apprenticeship programs that support skilled trades, and
- Leverage existing workforce strengths to attract projects requiring specialized industrial skills.

3.4 Recruit Value-Added Manufacturing: Value-added manufacturing aids in diversification of the economy while also creating higher-wage jobs. While Colstrip remains a community primarily supported by energy industries, there is also significant agricultural producers and activities that support the local and regional economy. These industries, as well as others, often have opportunities to expand on, or supplement businesses that already exist.

Tasks

- Target manufacturers that process raw materials into higher-value products,
- Explore opportunities in agricultural processing, building products, metal fabrication, industrial components, and energy-related equipment manufacturing,
- Encourage projects that create export-oriented economic activity.



3.5: Support Small-Scale and Entrepreneurial Manufacturing: Survey responses indicate support for small manufacturing businesses as part of the community's diversification strategy. Development of small manufacturers help reduce dependence on a single industry and can provide outsized economic benefits to rural/small communities like Colstrip because they create jobs and often require less capital investment than large industrial projects.

Tasks

- Encourage development of locally owned manufacturing businesses and artisan production enterprises,
- Provide technical assistance, financing resources, and business development support,
- Utilize the BIC as an industrial and maker-space facility, and
- Promote business incubation opportunities for manufacturing startups.

3.6: Leverage Existing Infrastructure: Colstrip's rail access, transportation connections, industrial facilities, water resources, and energy infrastructure are competitive advantages that can be leveraged to attract multiple industries and businesses. This in combination with the highly acknowledged quality of life benefits, position Colstrip well for development. Existing infrastructure reduces development costs and improves site attractiveness for manufacturers.

Tasks

- Market Colstrip's infrastructure assets and quality of life as the competitive advantage that they are,
- Prioritize recruitment efforts targeting industries that benefit from these assets,
- Coordinate infrastructure planning and investments to ensure long-term industrial competitiveness, and
- Support projects that maximize utilization of existing community infrastructure investments.

3.7: Recruit Advanced and Technology-Based Manufacturing: Advanced manufacturing businesses often provide higher wages and long-term diversification of the economy in a meaningful way. These are often interconnected to technology and sometimes energy markets and, as a result, give Colstrip a competitive advantage and opportunity for growth.

Tasks

- Target emerging manufacturers utilizing automation, robotics, energy technologies, and advanced production processes,
- Promote Colstrip's broadband infrastructure and workforce adaptability/relevance,
- Encourage manufacturing operations that integrate technology and industrial production, and
- Support facilities associated with clean energy equipment, electrical components, and industrial technology products.

3.8: Pursue Public-Private Partnerships for Industrial Growth: Strategic partnerships can help accelerate project development, increase project opportunities, and improve competitiveness of the project. The City and SEMDC are well versed in development of partnerships. This is just an expansion of those efforts to specifically support industrial growth.

Tasks

- Collaborate with utilities, economic development organizations, educational institutions, developers, and government agencies,
- Pursue funding opportunities specifically for industrial infrastructure and workforce development, and
- Support partnerships that encourage industrial recruitment and expansion

Goal 4: Skilled Trades and Workforce Development

One of the strongest assets identified in both the 2017 strategy and the 2026 survey remains Colstrip's highly skilled workforce. Throughout the past decade, workforce development has continued to be central to Colstrip's diversification efforts. Community members continue to recognize the importance of skilled trades, electrical work, construction, maintenance, and equipment operation as foundational community strengths supporting future growth. As members of the workforce age and retire, this opens opportunities for 2nd and 3rd generation workforce to step into those positions. As emerging energy, manufacturing, and industrial projects move forward, workforce development will remain one of Colstrip's most important competitive advantages.

Strategies are specifically aligned with those industries (energy, manufacturing, and industrial) identified as having the highest potential for growth. This does not minimize the value of workforce development that will support other businesses including retail, housing, healthcare, and education. All of these have also been identified as community priorities requiring skilled/trained workforce.

Goal 4 Strategies

4.1: Strengthen and Expand Energy Career Pathways: Energy production, transmission and related businesses continue to be a primary economic driver for Colstrip. While this industry is continually changing, energy use is increasing. This will require a growing technically skilled workforce specific to energy industries, both existing and emerging.

Tasks

- Expand technical and vocational training programs focused on advanced energy industries
- Partner with educational institutions and organized labor organizations/groups to provide certifications in nuclear, electrical, industrial maintenance instrumentation, and process operations
- Develop apprenticeship and internship opportunities linked to prospective projects
- Support workforce succession planning as traditional energy industries evolve.

4.2: Strengthen Technology Workforce Development: Long term success in development and expansion of technology industries requires a workforce equipped for those careers. As the BIC becomes fully operational, SEMDC and the City should consider programs, partnerships, and educational opportunities that specifically support these industries.

Tasks

- Collaborate with schools, colleges, and workforce partners to expand technology-related training opportunities
- Promote certifications and education in information technology, cybersecurity, networking, data analytics, software development, and artificial intelligence applications
- Align training programs with emerging employer demands

4.3: Strengthen Workforce Development for Industrial Careers: Similarly to strategies related to energy and technology development, workforce availability remains one of the most important factors influencing industrial development and site selection.

Tasks

- Expand training programs related to welding, machining, industrial maintenance, electrical systems, instrumentation and controls, construction trades, and manufacturing operations
- Develop partnerships with educational institutions and industry employers,
- Support apprenticeship and internship programs
- Promote career pathways for youth and transitioning workers

Goal 5: Agriculture, Recreation, and Tourism

The 2017 Strategy also outlined expanded opportunities in agriculture, outdoor recreation and tourism. While these sectors will not replace the scale of energy-related employment, they can contribute significantly to economic diversification and community identity. 2026 survey results demonstrate continued community recognition and appreciation for recreational amenities. 76% of respondents identified parks and recreational opportunities as one of Colstrip's greatest assets.

In contrast, respondents noted a lack of restaurants, retail, and entertainment services they believe to be a critical part of enhancing quality of life as well as driving tourism. 44% of respondents noted growth potential for restaurants, followed by 38% for recreation/ entertainment businesses, and 29% for retail services.

One of the 2017 Strategy recommendations was the development of a marketing campaign specifically to attract young professionals and families in Colstrip. The ***Montana Made Possible*** campaign was launched in 2024 to address this goal. It is too early to measure the impact of that campaign, but it continues to be utilized as a part of marketing Colstrip.

Agriculture also remains recognized as part of the region's economic foundation. In Rosebud County, total agricultural product sales were about $75.8 million (2022). Just under 30% of survey respondents indicated they believed traditional agriculture (farming and ranching) and value-added agricultural services (meat and farm goods processing, distilling, and related services) had growth potential.

Based on survey responses as well as national and regional data, it is recommended that future efforts focus on enhancing local amenities, continuing to promote tourism activity, and supporting value-added agricultural enterprises rather than large-scale destination tourism initiatives.

Goal 5 Strategies

5.1: Enhance Community Amenities and Visitor Services: Survey respondents continue to identify restaurants, retail, and entertainment as community needs and opportunities for business growth that would increase quality of life and support visitors/tourism. While these businesses diversify the economy, they are not typically high-wage or high-volume job producers, making them difficult to staff and maintain. Nevertheless, they should be considered in efforts to sustain and grow Colstrip's population and attraction to visitors and potential new residents.

Tasks

- Support development/expansion of restaurants, cafes, and food-service businesses
- Encourage additional retail and entertainment options that serve both residents and visitors
- Identify opportunities to strengthen the overall visitor experience through improved amenities and services
- Support projects that enhance Colstrip's attractiveness to live, work, and visit

5.2: Strengthen Recreation-Based Economic Development: Colstrip parks and recreational opportunities were identified by 76% of survey respondents as one of Colstrip's greatest community assets and as a primary contributor to quality of life in the community. Maintenance and expansion of these amenities will be essential to maintaining population and attracting new businesses/residents.

Tasks:

- Continue investing in parks, trails, recreational facilities, and outdoor amenities
- Enhance access to recreational assets for residents and visitors
- Promote recreation as both a quality-of-life asset and an economic development tool
- Support development of recreation-oriented small businesses and services.



5.3: Support Outdoor Recreation Businesses: Recreation-support and value-added businesses can increase visitor spending while enhancing amenities for residents. Support of these specific types of retailers and providers will serve both the expressed desire of increasing retail and amenity providers and improving the experience at existing parks and recreational attractions.

Tasks:

- Encourage businesses that serve outdoor recreation users, including sporting goods retailers, equipment rental providers, guide and outfitter services, outdoor event organizers, and recreation-related hospitality services
- Support entrepreneurship opportunities tied to local recreation assets

5.4: Promote Regional Tourism Opportunities: Regional tourism partnerships can generate visitation without requiring significant new tourism infrastructure. The ***Montana Made Possible*** campaign was designed specifically for this purpose and was successfully implemented as part of the work done on the 2017 Strategy goals. Tasks as outlined for this strategy build on the 2017 campaign and continue to advance tourism goals.

Tasks:

- Create marketing "sub campaigns" that market Colstrip as a gateway to southeastern Montana's outdoor, agricultural, and cultural resources
- Continue collaboration with regional tourism organizations and neighboring communities
- Encourage longer visitor stays through packaging of local attractions and experiences
- Continue utilizing existing marketing initiatives and branding efforts

5.5: Support Value-Added Agricultural Enterprises: Value-added agriculture increases local economic activity and captures a greater share of agricultural revenue within the community. In the 2017 Strategy, Strategy 5.1 outlined ways in which to promote agri/eco/geo-tourism, which are still viable strategies, however, survey responses and state/national trends in 2026 encourage the addition of more direct value-added industries such as processing. These support the creation of new business and have a higher impact on workforce and related wages.

Tasks

- Encourage businesses that process or add value to agricultural products produced in the region
- Support opportunities including meat processing, specialty food production, farm-to-market products, agricultural packaging and distribution, and distilling and craft beverage production
- Connect producers with technical assistance and financing resources that support these efforts.

5.6: Expand Agricultural Entrepreneurship: Agriculture remains an important component of Rosebud County and by extension, Colstrip's economy. This offers opportunities for business growth and diversification that continue to support traditional agriculture and ranching industries while encouraging consideration of ways in which farmers/ranchers can sustain and grow their businesses in support of diversification efforts.

Tasks

- Support startup and expansion opportunities for agricultural producers and agribusinesses
- Encourage diversification into specialty products and niche markets,
- Promote direct-to-consumer sales opportunities
- Strengthen business development and support services for agricultural entrepreneurs

5.7: Develop Additional Local and Regional Events: While planning events can be time consuming, events can generate economic activity, promote visitation, and strengthen community pride and visibility. Colstrip Days, which occur every July, and the Energy Open which occurs every August, are longstanding examples of the effectiveness and economic impact of events, especially in small communities.

Tasks:

- Support community events, festivals, tournaments, and agricultural activities that attract visitors and increase local spending
- Encourage events that celebrate Colstrip's community identity, outdoor resources, and regional heritage
- Partner with local organizations to expand annual event offerings
- Explore opportunities for additional recreation and tourism-related events



5.8: Improve Community Beautification and Visitor Readiness: Community appearance contributes significantly to tourism, business recruitment, and resident attraction efforts. The first impression visitors have of a community is often their only impression, making it important that those first impressions are positive.

Tasks:

- Invest in gateway improvements, as well as improvements/additions to signage, landscaping, and public spaces
- Improve wayfinding and visitor information resources
- Support projects that create a positive first impression for visitors and prospective residents

5.9: Promote Agritourism Opportunities: The 2017 Strategy identified agri/eco/geo-tourism as a possible strategy for increasing recreation and tourism opportunities. While many of those specific tasks did not come to fruition due to higher level priorities and public support, the opportunity remains.

Tasks:

- Encourage tourism activities connected to working farms, ranches, and agricultural heritage
- Support educational tours, agricultural events, local food experiences, and seasonal attractions
- Collaborate with local/regional producers to create visitor experiences
- Explore opportunities that complement existing agricultural operations

5.10: Encourage Hospitality and Lodging Development: Hospitality amenities support tourism, workforce attraction, and broader economic development efforts. As with restaurants and retail, these businesses do not typically provide high-wage-earning opportunities, but are nonetheless a critical component of the visitor experience and related economic opportunity.

Tasks:

- Evaluate opportunities to expand lodging options to support visitors, contractors, business travelers, and event participants
- Encourage investments that improve accommodation quality and capacity
- Support hospitality businesses that enhance local visitor experiences

Goal 6: Quality of Life, Housing, and Community Development

While housing was identified as a challenge in the 2017 Strategy, in the 2026 survey responses, housing has emerged as the top economic development priority (much like broadband in the 2017 Strategy). 76% of survey respondents identified housing as Colstrip's greatest current need. 74% identified housing as a barrier to business attraction and expansion. And 62% identified housing and rental development as a sector with significant growth potential.

In addition to housing, respondents identified restaurants/dining establishments, entertainment, specialized healthcare services and healthcare access, and educational opportunities as important quality-of-life needs. These findings suggest that future diversification efforts should place greater emphasis on housing availability, residential development, community amenities, and quality-of-life investments that support workforce attraction and retention.

Goal 6 Strategies

6.1: Expand Housing Availability Across All Market Segments: Housing has become one of the defining economic development challenges in Montana and throughout the United States. Housing supply has not kept pace with demand and housing affordability has become a universal concern. Rural communities face additional challenges based on aging housing stock, lack of rental units, and higher per-unit development costs that limit private development activity and hinder developer attraction efforts.
Housing was identified as Colstrip's greatest current need by 76% of survey respondents and the most significant barrier to workforce attraction and business expansion. Particularly regarding housing, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that will resolve the issue.

Tasks:

- Support development of new single-family housing, multi-family housing, townhomes, and workforce housing
- Encourage a mix of owner-occupied and rental housing options
- Identify barriers to housing development and pursue policies that facilitate new builds
- Promote rehabilitation and reinvestment in existing housing stock
- Partner with developers, employers, and housing organizations to address housing shortages

6.2: Support Workforce and Employer-Assisted Housing Initiatives: Workforce housing is critical to support economic diversification and business recruitment efforts. While all housing development is essential and necessary, support particularly of workforce/employment housing often has the most immediate and direct impact on the economy.

Tasks:

- Explore employer-assisted housing programs tied to major industries and future employers
- Encourage public-private partnerships that support workforce housing development
- Pursue state and federal housing funding opportunities
- Coordinate and include housing strategies with anticipated workforce needs associated with energy, manufacturing, and technology projects

6.3: Encourage Residential Development and Neighborhood Investment: Residential growth contributes to population stabilization, workforce attraction, and expanded local spending. In partnership with workforce housing, neighborhood investments assist in both workforce retention and recruitment.

Tasks:

- Promote construction of new residential subdivisions and infill housing developments
- Invest in community infrastructure needed to support residential growth
- Encourage/incentivize neighborhood revitalization and property improvement programs
- Support housing products that appeal to young families, professionals, and retiree

6.4: Strengthen Healthcare Access and Services: Access to healthcare is often a key factor influencing business location decisions and residential relocation choices. While the Colstrip Medical Center is available to provide basic medical services, Colstrip does not have a hospital or emergency department. There are also limited, and in some cases no, specialty medical services such as cardiology, orthopedics, or dermatology. 30% of survey respondents indicated that access to healthcare services was a priority need and that nearly 26% indicated this had the most growth potential in Colstrip.

Tasks:

- Support efforts to recruit healthcare providers and specialists
- Expand access to healthcare services through partnerships and innovative delivery models
- Explore additional opportunities for telehealth and technology-enhanced healthcare services
- Advocate for healthcare investments that improve service availability and workforce recruitment

6.5: Coordinate Long-Term Community Growth Planning: Coordinated planning helps ensure that housing and community investments support future economic opportunities. In 2023, Montana enacted a series of housing reforms designed to make it less expensive to build housing. This was followed by the adoption of the Montana Land Use Planning Act which is designed to streamline planning and zoning processes. While both efforts target larger communities (over 5,000 residents), benefits to rural communities include access to state and federal housing development grants, and incentives for development of workforce housing tied to energy, healthcare, education, and public sector needs. Both Colstrip and Rosebud County updated their growth policies in 2025 and it will be important to continue to coordinate diversification efforts with Montana and county growth planning.

Tasks:

- Align housing, infrastructure, economic development, and land-use planning efforts
- Monitor population and workforce trends to ensure adequate community services
- Plan for future growth associated with economic diversification initiatives
- Develop strategies that support sustainable community development over the long term

6.6: Improve Senior Living and Aging-in-Place Opportunities: Addressing the housing and medical needs of all age groups contributes to community stability and long-term population retention. In the 2017 Strategy, housing and related services for senior citizens/retired community members as well as disabled members of the community was a priority. While the 2026 survey did not reflect the same urgency, it is estimated that 23% of the Colstrip population is 65 years of age or older, making this population a critical focus in population retention efforts.

Tasks:

- Encourage housing and service options for older adults
- Support healthcare, transportation, and community services that allow residents to remain in the community as they age
- Explore opportunities for additional assisted living and senior-focused housing developments

6.7: Foster Community Engagement and Civic Leadership: Strong civic engagement supports successful implementation of long-term economic development strategies. Retention of younger generations is often dependent on their ability to be part of a shared vision for the community's future, and to find meaningful work that provides a livable wage. Engaging the entire community in identifying local assets and opportunities builds buy-in for change, strengthens workforce development, and builds social capital and community resilience. It is important to build in succession plans for community leadership who will continue the long-term work of diversification.

Tasks:

- Support leadership development, volunteerism, and community participation
- Encourage collaboration among residents, businesses, nonprofits, and public agencies
- Promote initiatives that strengthen community pride and social connections
- Engage residents in shaping future community development priorities

Looking Forward

The 2026 survey confirms that while community priorities have matured and become more focused, the goals established in the original 2017 Diversification Strategy remain largely relevant. While energy development remains central to Colstrip's future, residents increasingly recognize that economic sustainability will also depend on considering emerging energy technologies, addressing housing shortages, supporting local businesses, expanding healthcare services, attracting new residents, and improving community amenities.

This next phase of economic diversification should build upon the substantial progress already made while concentrating resources on the priorities most clearly identified by residents:

- Housing development and workforce housing
- Advanced energy opportunities, including transmission, SMRs and natural gas generation
- Business retention, recruitment, and entrepreneurship
- Healthcare expansion
- Technology opportunities
- Workforce development and skilled trades training
- Community amenities that enhance quality of life and attract investment

These provide a framework for guiding economic diversification efforts over the next 5-10 years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The development of this updated economic diversification strategy was guided by the City of Colstrip, and Southeastern Montana Development Corporation (SEMDC), with a broad cross section of regional stakeholders, industry partners, business owners, and organizations working with key issues related to economic development.

The Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy was facilitated and analyzed by:

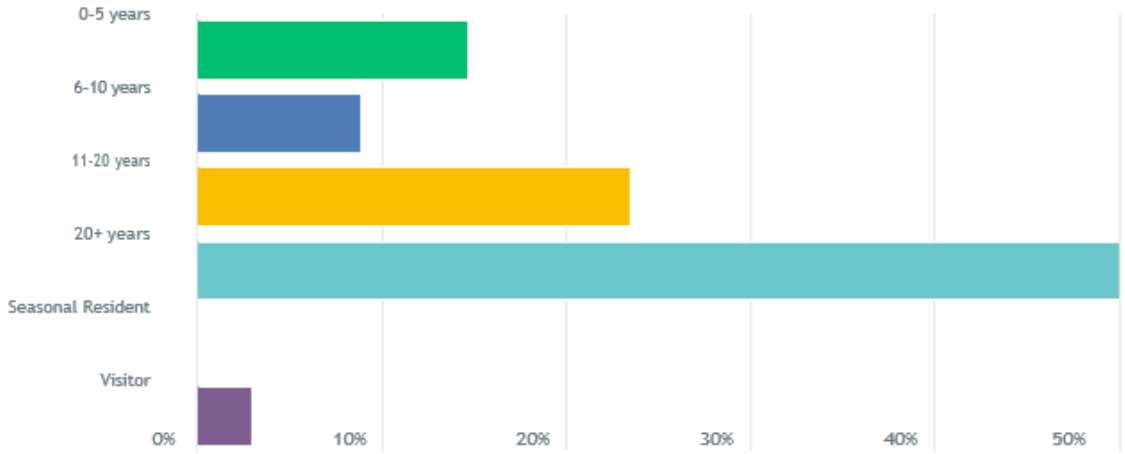


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APPENDIX A: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT/SWOT

Q1

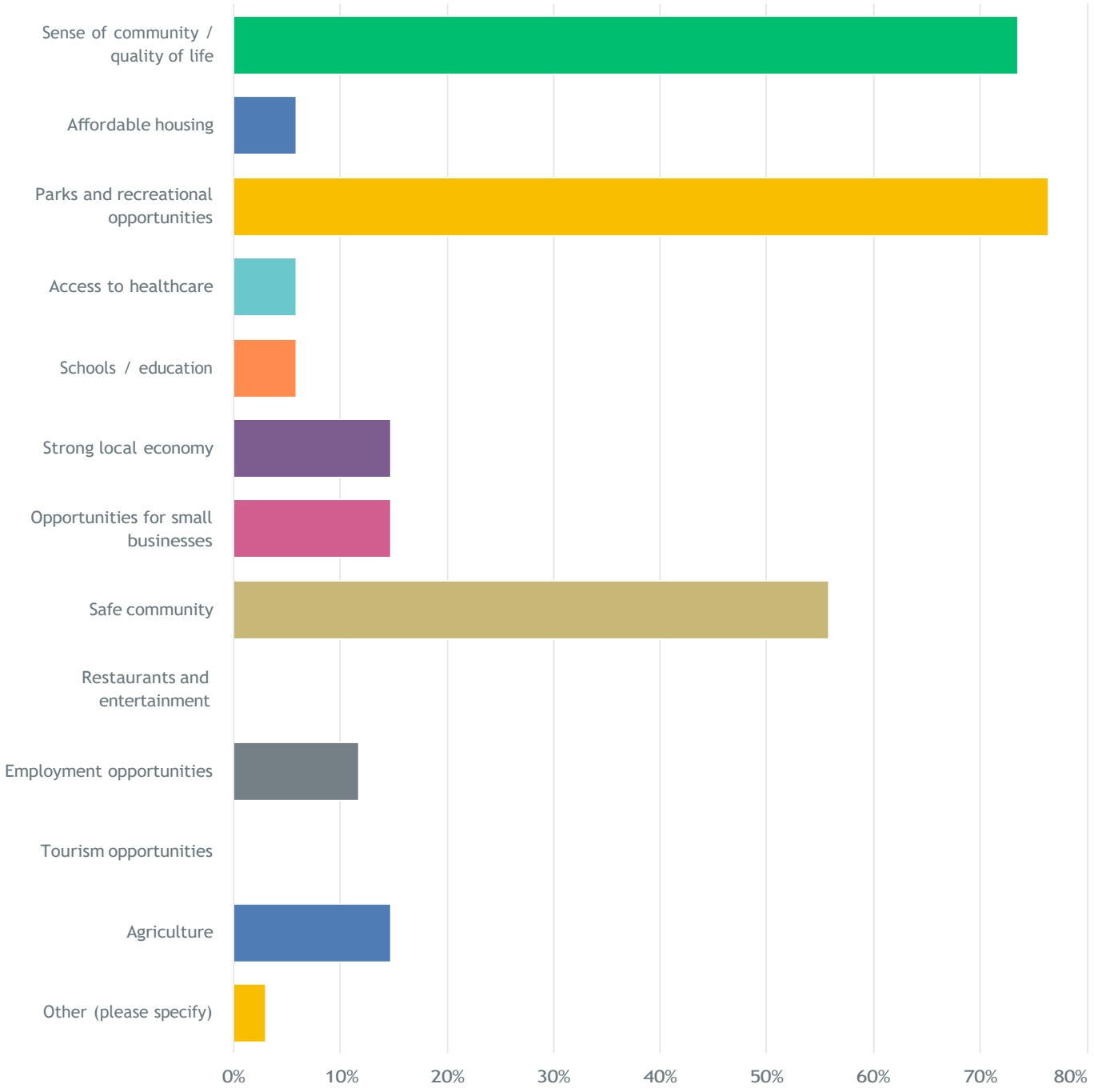
How long have you resided in Colstrip/Rosebud County?



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q2 34 responses

What do you see as Colstrips's greatest assets, or what makes itstandout? Check your top 3.



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Sense of community / quality of life	73.53%	25
Total		96

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

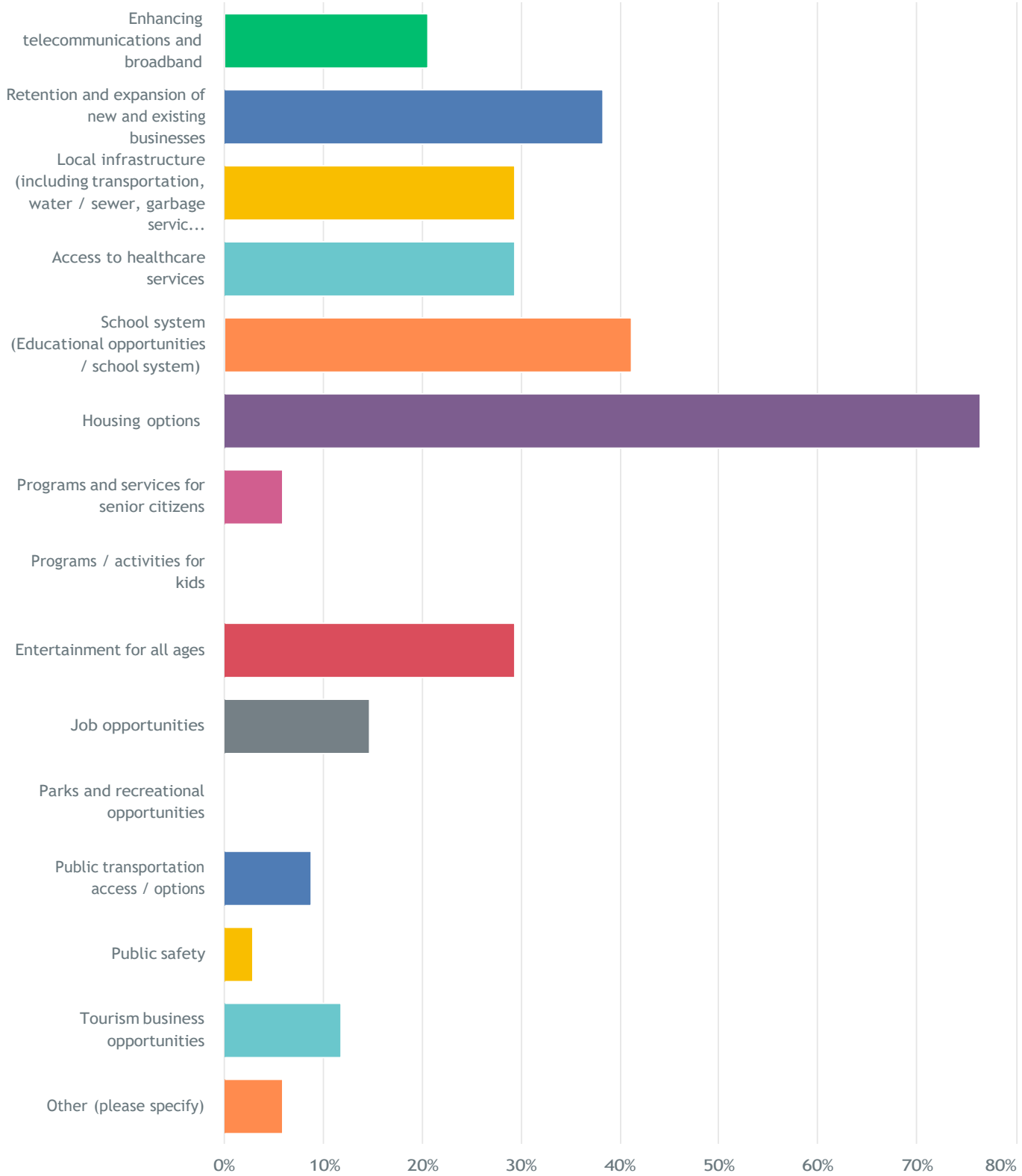
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Affordable housing	5.88%	2
Parks and recreational opportunities	76.47%	26
Access to healthcare	5.88%	2
Schools / education	5.88%	2
Strong local economy	14.71%	5
Opportunities for small businesses	14.71%	5
Safe community	55.88%	19
Restaurants and entertainment	0%	0
Employment opportunities	11.76%	4
Tourism opportunities	0%	0
Agriculture	14.71%	5
Other (please specify)	2.94%	1
Total		96

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Bars	7/24/2026 11:46 AM

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q3 34 responses

What areas do you see as Colstrip's biggest needs or areas thatColstrip can improve? Check your top 3.



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

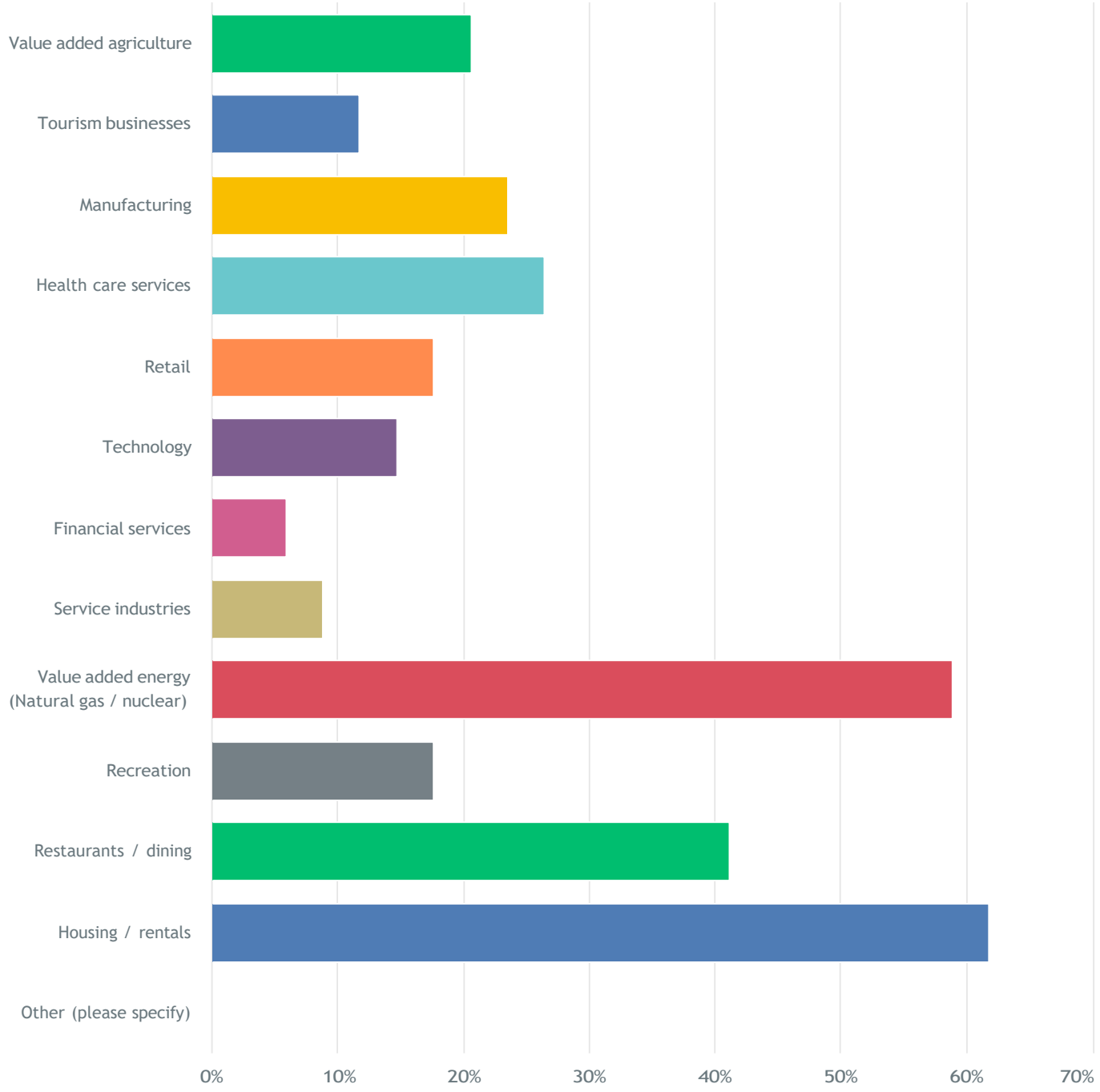
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Enhancing telecommunications and broadband	20.59%	7
Retention and expansion of new and existing businesses	38.24%	13
Local infrastructure (including transportation, water / sewer, garbage services, etc.)	29.41%	10
Access to healthcare services	29.41%	10
School system (Educational opportunities / school system)	41.18%	14
Housing options	76.47%	26
Programs and services for senior citizens	5.88%	2
Programs / activities for kids	0%	0
Entertainment for all ages	29.41%	10
Job opportunities	14.71%	5
Parks and recreational opportunities	0%	0
Public transportation access / options	8.82%	3
Public safety	2.94%	1
Tourism business opportunities	11.76%	4
Other (please specify)	5.88%	2
Total		107

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Restaurants/places to eat out	7/24/2026 12:41 PM
2	I marked housing for all 3 priorities	7/24/2026 11:31 AM

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q4 34 responses

Which business industries have the most “growth potential” in Colstrip? Check your top 3.



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Value added agriculture	20.59%	7
Total		105

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

There are no responses.

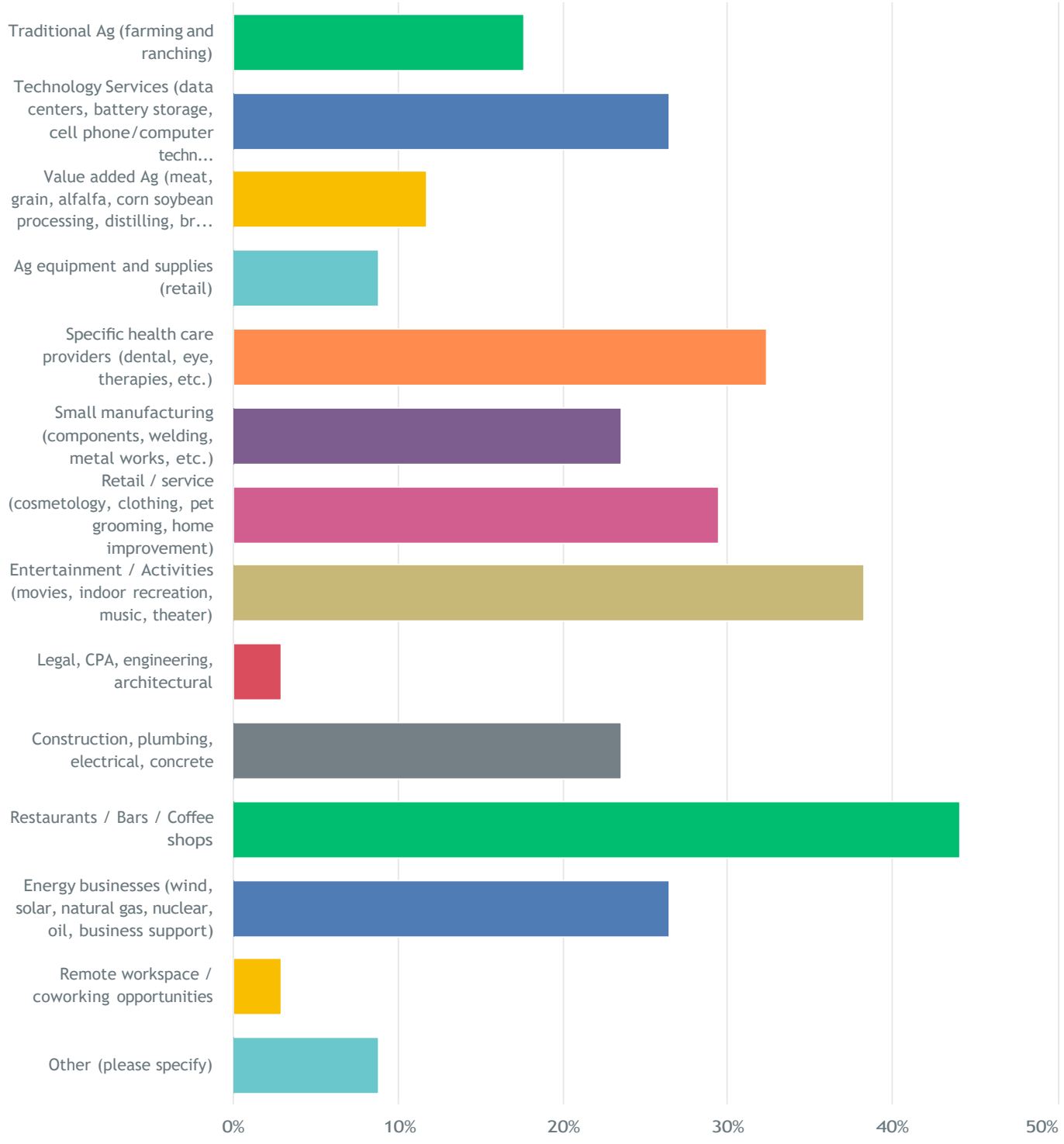
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Tourism businesses	11.76%	4
Manufacturing	23.53%	8
Health care services	26.47%	9
Retail	17.65%	6
Technology	14.71%	5
Financial services	5.88%	2
Service industries	8.82%	3
Value added energy (Natural gas / nuclear)	58.82%	20
Recreation	17.65%	6
Restaurants / dining	41.18%	14
Housing / rentals	61.76%	21
Other (please specify)	0%	0
Total		105

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q5 34 responses

Based on your top choices from question (#4) above, what TYPES of business would you like to see in Colstrip? Check your top 3.



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

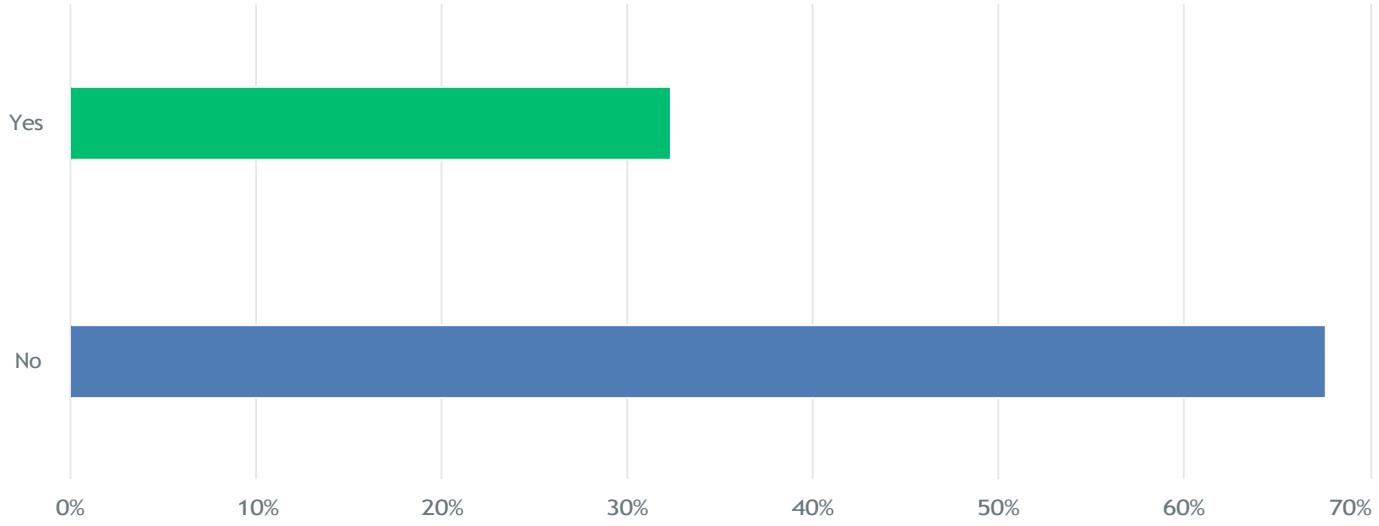
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Traditional Ag (farming and ranching)	17.65%	6
Technology Services (data centers, battery storage, cell phone/computer technology and support)	26.47%	9
Value added Ag (meat, grain, alfalfa, corn soybean processing, distilling, brewing, etc.)	11.76%	4
Ag equipment and supplies (retail)	8.82%	3
Specific health care providers (dental, eye, therapies, etc.)	32.35%	11
Small manufacturing (components, welding, metal works, etc.)	23.53%	8
Retail / service (cosmetology, clothing, pet grooming, home improvement)	29.41%	10
Entertainment / Activities (movies, indoor recreation, music, theater)	38.24%	13
Legal, CPA, engineering, architectural	2.94%	1
Construction, plumbing, electrical, concrete	23.53%	8
Restaurants / Bars / Coffee shops	44.12%	15
Energy businesses (wind, solar, natural gas, nuclear, oil, business support)	26.47%	9
Remote workspace / coworking opportunities	2.94%	1
Other (please specify)	8.82%	3
Total		101

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	For tech services only data centers and cell phone/computer support and for energy only natural gas, nuclear, and oil-not wind/solar	7/24/2026 12:41 PM
2	Affordable Housing/Rentals	7/15/2026 10:55 AM
3	Let’s not forget to include coal for future potential.	6/28/2026 10:16 PM

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

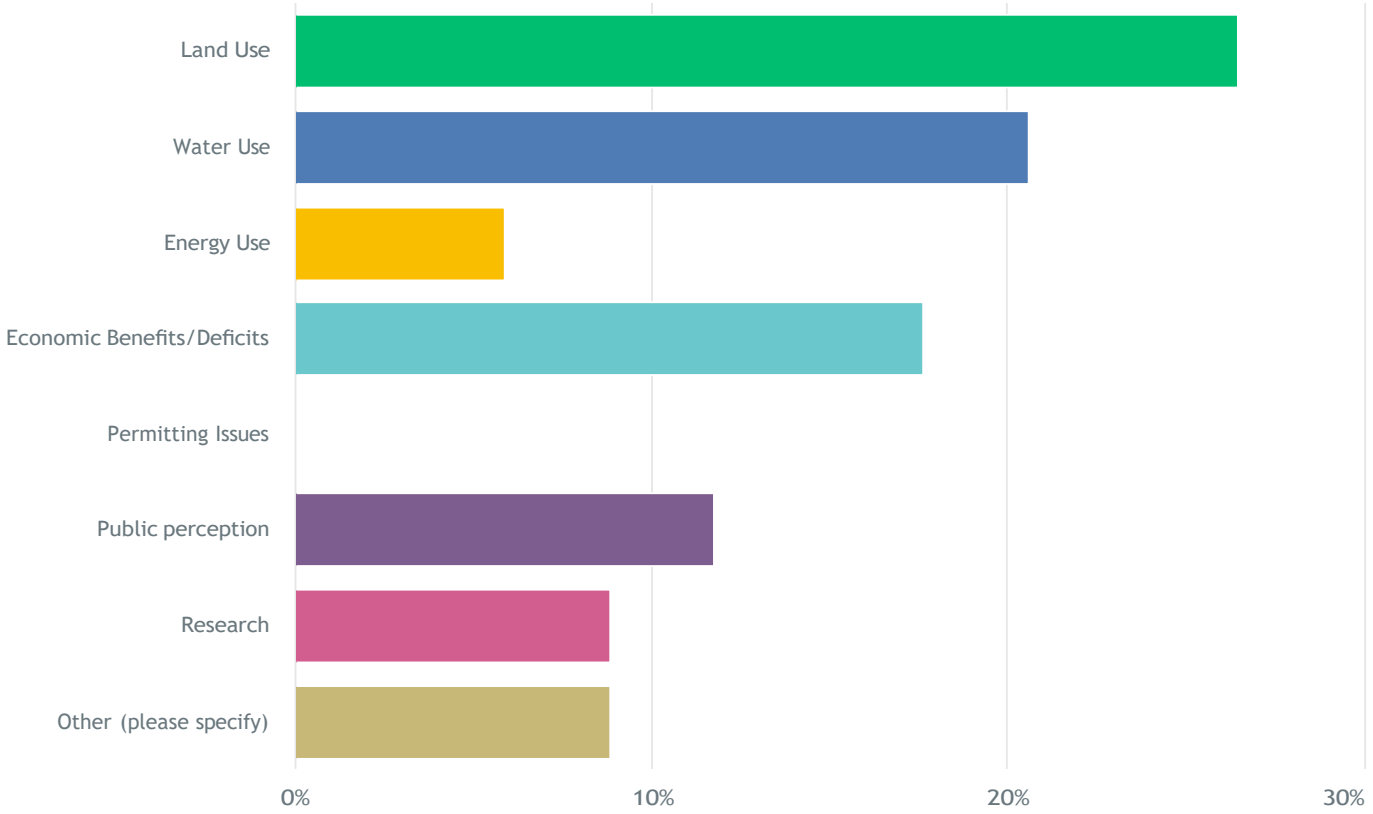
Data Centers have become a critical part of the land and resource use, and economic impact discussions in the past 3-5 years. Do you believe a data center in the Colstrip/Rosebud County area would be a positive economic driver?



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q7 34 responses

On what did you base your opinion for question #6 above? Select the most relevant option.



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Land Use	26.47%	9
Water Use	20.59%	7
Energy Use	5.88%	2
Economic Benefits/Deficits	17.65%	6
Permitting Issues	0%	0
Public perception	11.76%	4
Research	8.82%	3
Other (please specify)	8.82%	3
Total		34

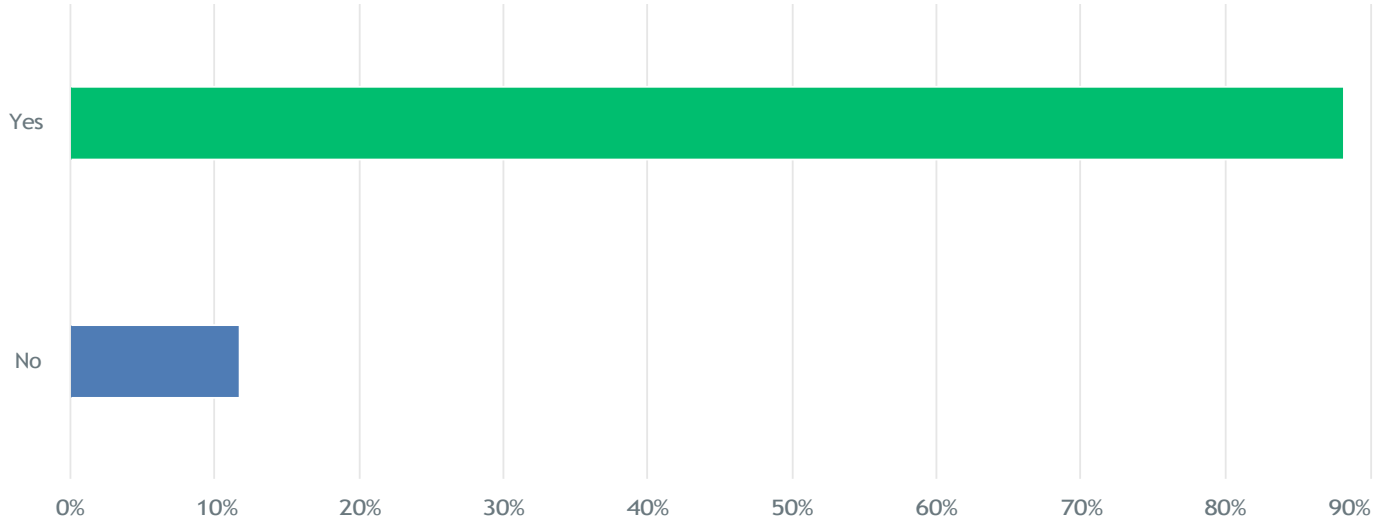
Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	I don't believe that data centers provide long term local economic growth.	7/24/2026 12:44 PM
2	This question does not allow for selecting more than one answer even though it says check all that apply. Land, water, energy, public perception, and overall environmental impact are all concerns. It is unfortunate that this question does not allow people to actually select all the answers that apply. It taints your results.	6/28/2026 10:16 PM
3	It only let me check one. But I would like to choose water use, land use, economic benefits/deficits and energy use	6/27/2026 10:56 AM

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

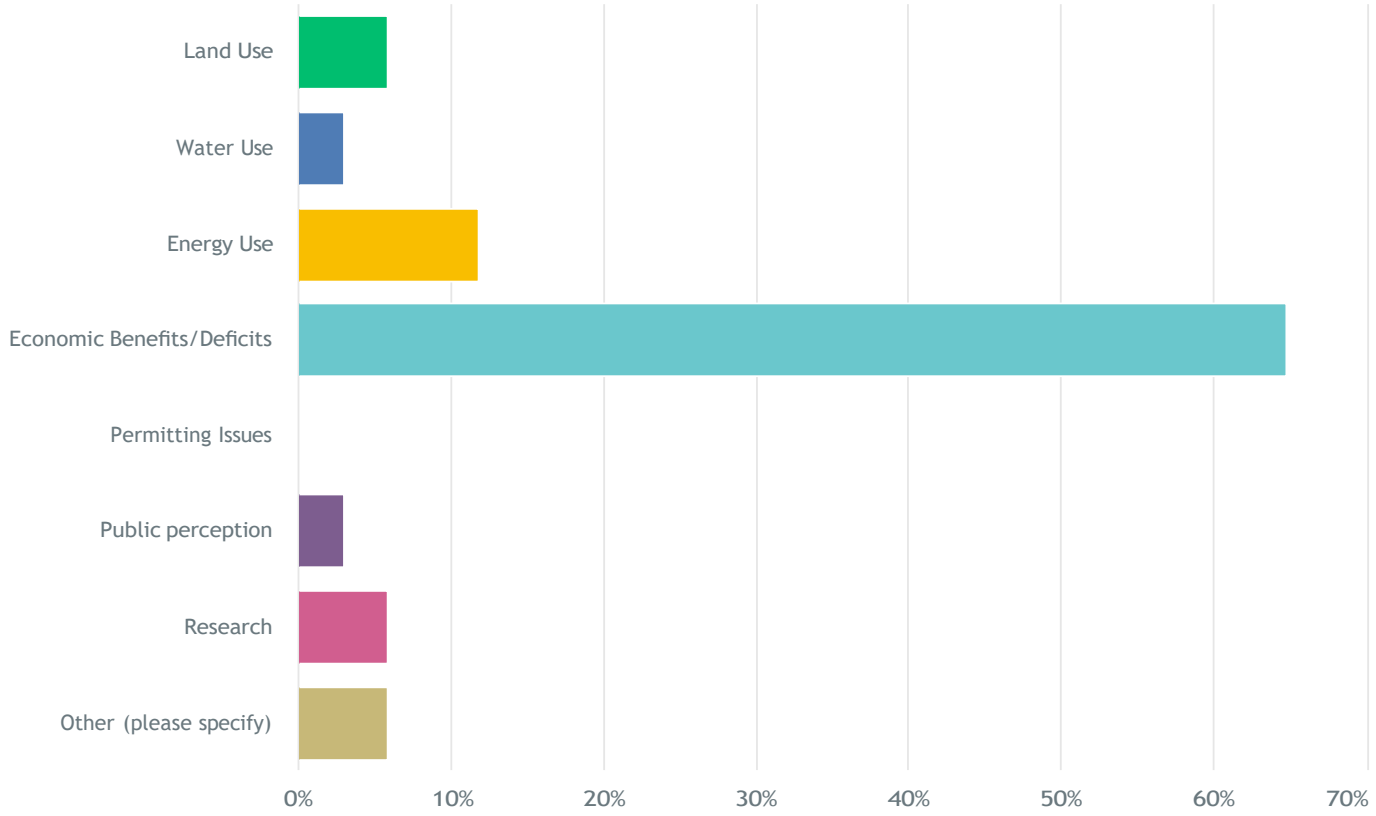
Small Nuclear Reactors (SMRs) have become a critical part of the land and resource use, and economic impact discussions in the past 3-5 years. Do you believe a SMR in the Colstrip/Rosebud County area would be a positive economic driver?



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q9 34 responses

On what did you base your opinion for question #8 above? Select the most relevant option.



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Land Use	5.88%	2
Water Use	2.94%	1
Energy Use	11.76%	4
Economic Benefits/Deficits	64.71%	22
Permitting Issues	0%	0
Public perception	2.94%	1
Research	5.88%	2
Other (please specify)	5.88%	2
Total		34

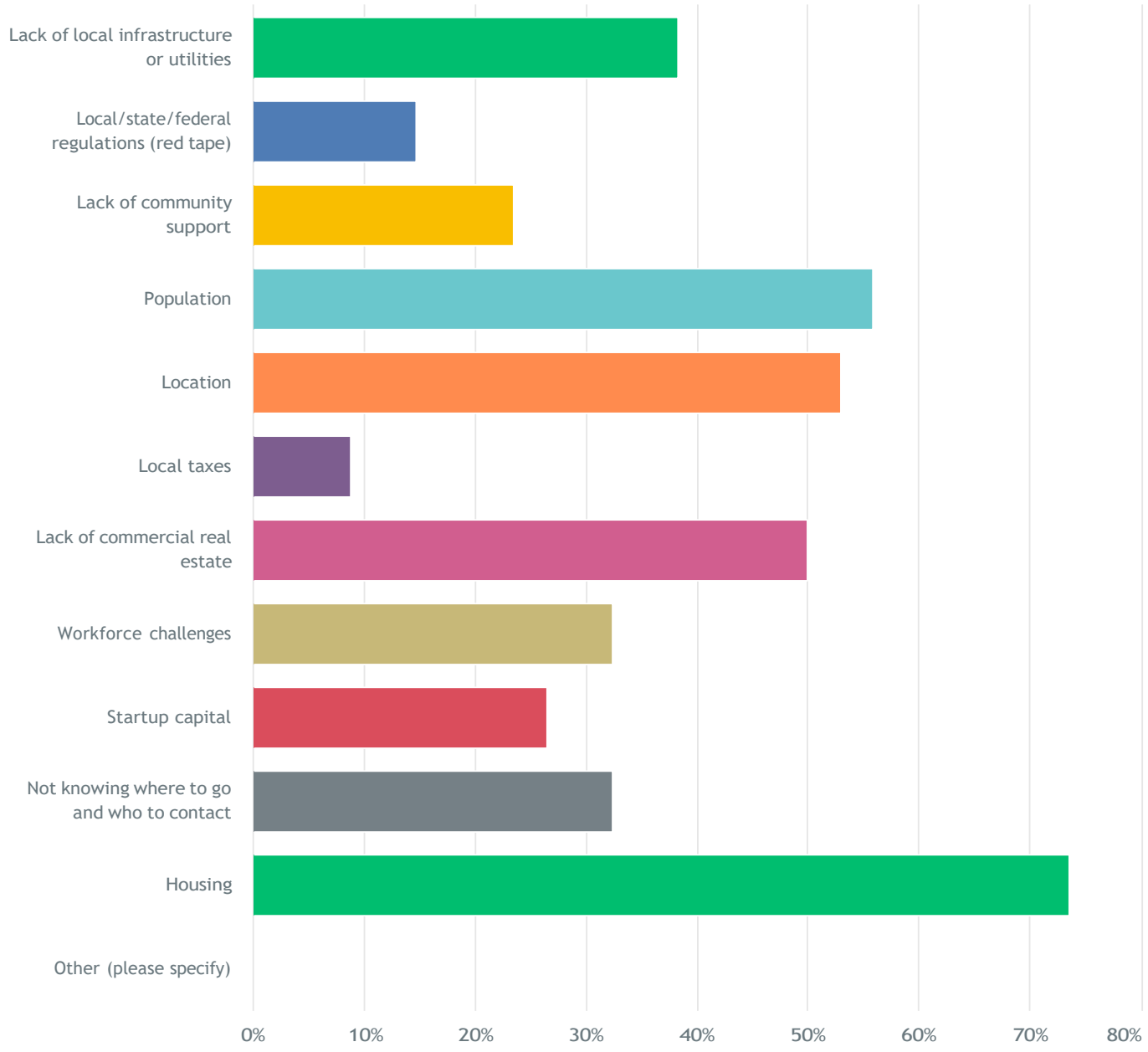
Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Stable employment	7/24/2026 12:37 PM
2	Again only one answer could be selected. People could not select anllthe things that applied. Economic benefits are my main reason.	6/28/2026 10:16 PM

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q10 34 responses

What do you see as some of the obstacles for new businesses to open in Colstrip?



Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Lack of local infrastructure or utilities	38.24%	13
Local/state/federal regulations (red tape)	14.71%	5
Lack of community support	23.53%	8
Total		139

Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE

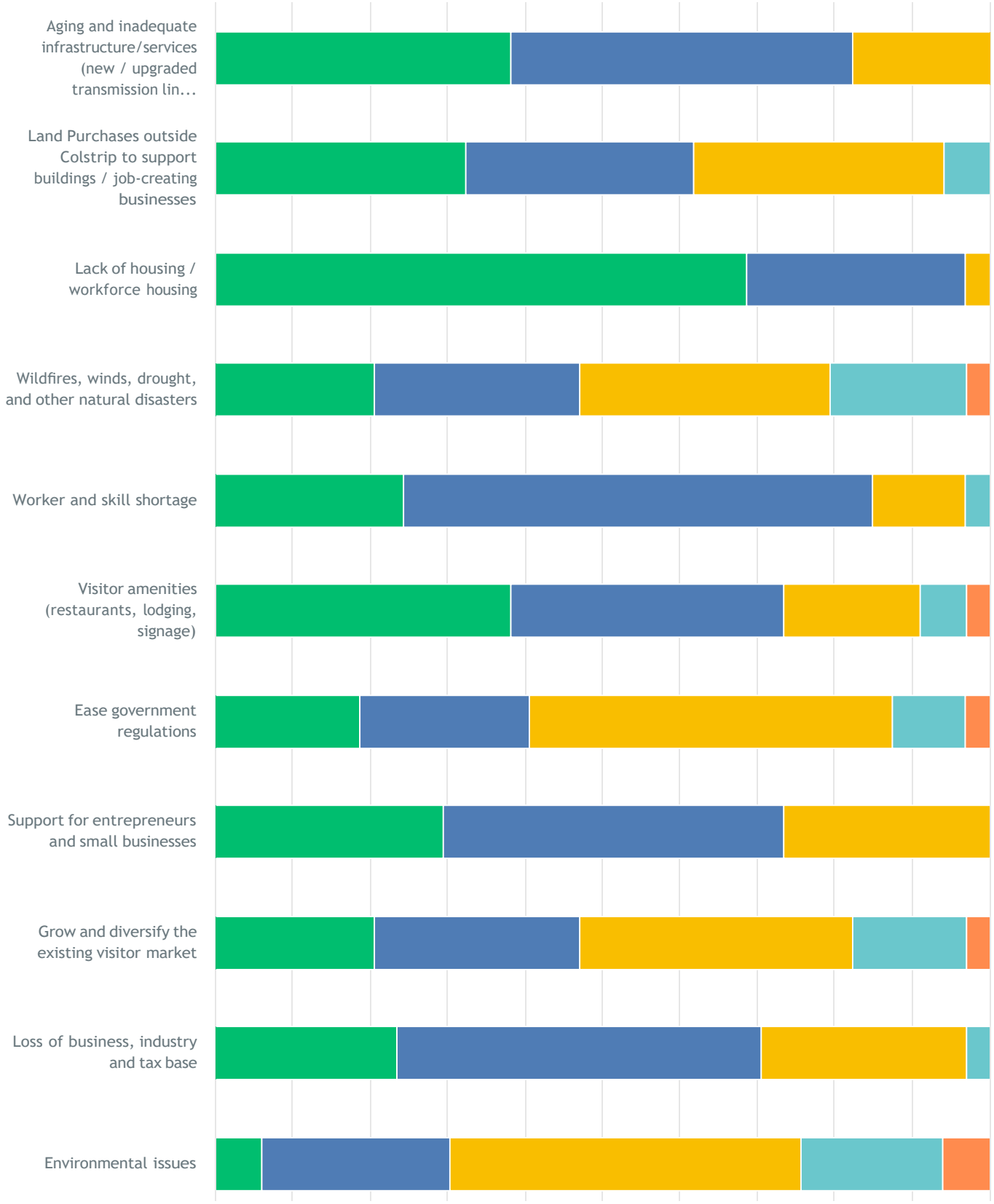
Answer Choices	Percentage	Responses
Population	55.88%	19
Location	52.94%	18
Local taxes	8.82%	3
Lack of commercial real estate	50.00%	17
Workforce challenges	32.35%	11
Startup capital	26.47%	9
Not knowing where to go and who to contact	32.35%	11
Housing	73.53%	25
Other (please specify)	0%	0
Total		139

There are no responses.

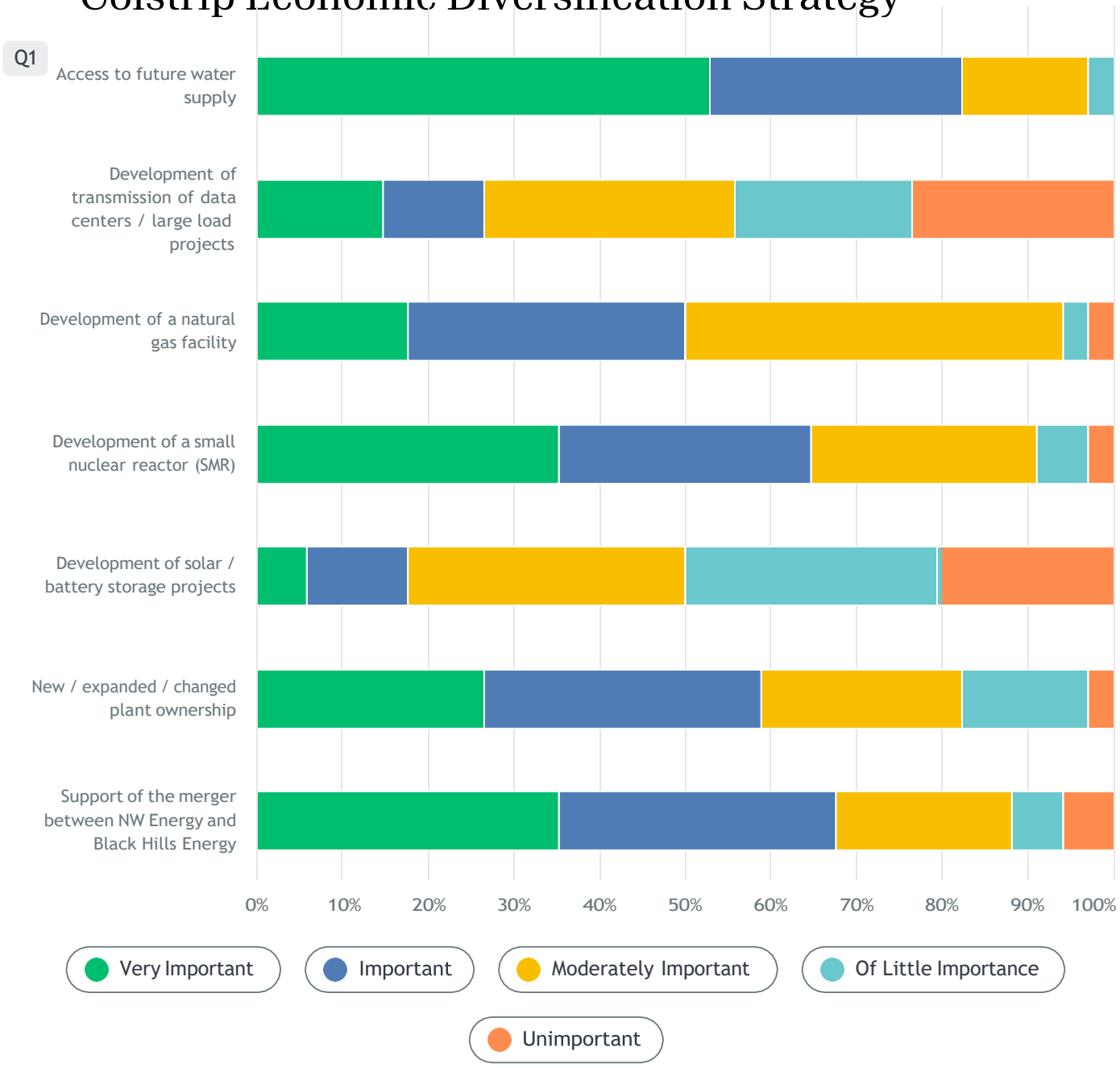
Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q11 34 responses

To continue to grow and diversify the Colstrip economy, please rate the importance of the following:



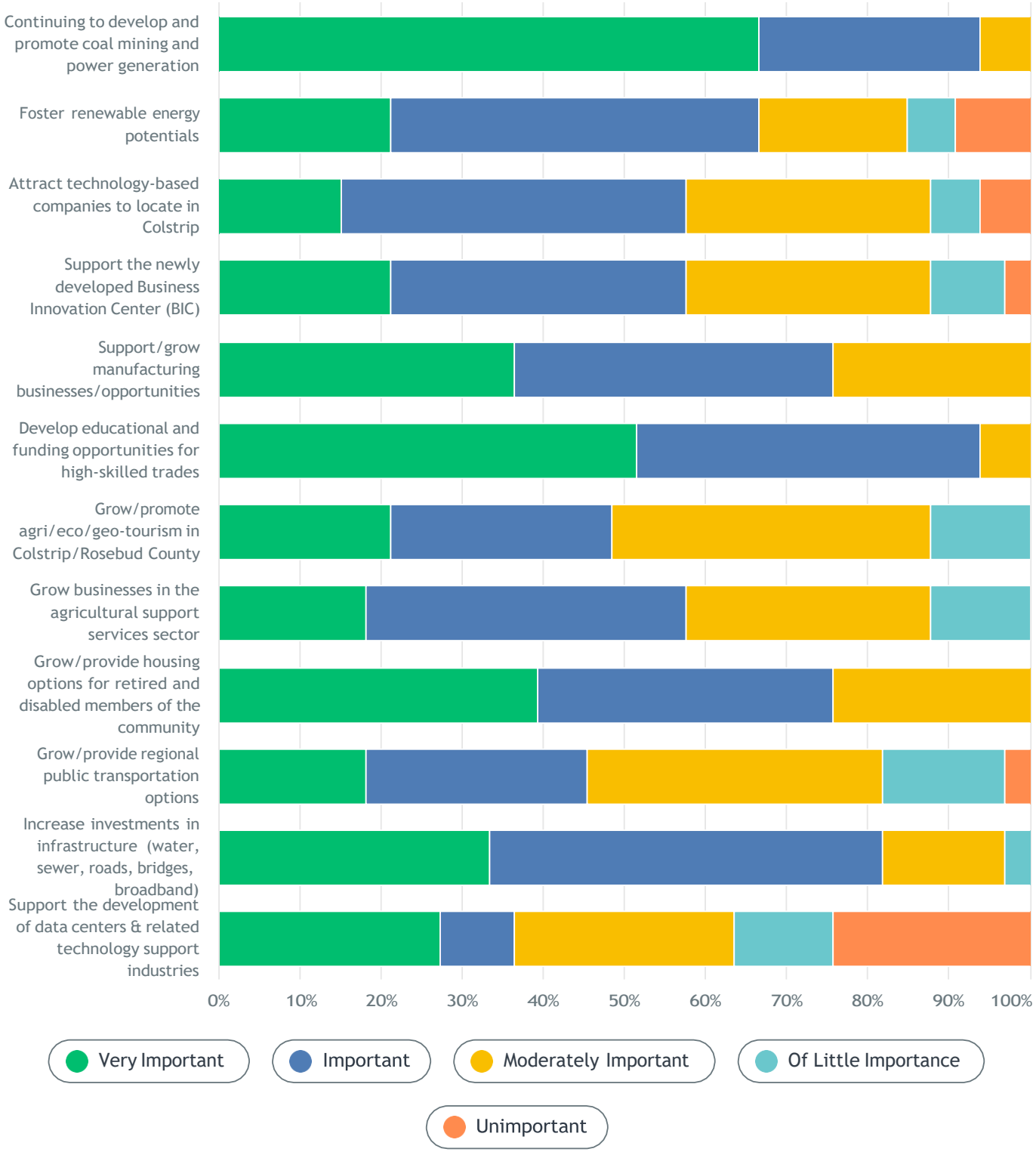
Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q12 33 responses

Based on goals developed in the original 2017 Economic Diversification Strategy, please rate the importance of the following for the next 5 years:



Colstrip Economic Diversification Strategy

Q1

Q13 Please provide any additional comments on the growth and diversification of Colstrip/the Colstrip economy.

Answered: 5 Skipped: 29

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	I'm interested in your action plans for analyzing and using the results of this survey. Do you have a defined process? Please advise the community of your intentions.	7/24/2026 12:37 PM
2	I would like to see the public library better funded.	7/24/2026 11:25 AM
3	Extremely against data centers. I do not think questions are clear and accurate to suggested responses.	7/15/2026 10:55 AM
4	I want data center and nuclear plant to increase home values	7/6/2026 4:54 PM
5	Add stuff for the kids other than cprd	6/28/2026 12:54 AM