CHALLENGE STATEMENT //

Downtown Revitalization and Partnership Building: 
Becoming a Business-Friendly Community

Center sits at a crossroads in the San Luis Valley. The community is a real place focused on locals, with a beautiful school, lovely historic buildings, and a people who love their town. Center has vacant buildings and available land, and Center wants business and manufacturing! How can Center reshape communications and partnerships to tell the world they are open for business?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF STUDIO WORKSHOP //

Preparation
Over the course of several months leading up to the Studio Workshop, Town Manager Brian Lujan and CU-Denver Student Coordinators discussed Center’s opportunities and challenges with various stakeholders in Center and the larger San Luis Valley. These conversations contributed to Center’s game plan going into the workshops and also added stakeholders to the team attending the In the Game conference in Aspen. The Center team entered the conference seeking more information on how to attract industry to Center, along with how they might fill the vacant 90-acre parcel of land and main street storefronts.

Day 1
The Center team entered Day 1 by painting a picture of the town’s incredible potential along with the obstacles that lay in the way of its revitalization. The goal for Day 1 was to gain insight from fresh perspectives at the table on Center’s past efforts and its future opportunities. The group agreed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, hemp, and other value-added agriculture were sources for future industry placement in Center. Yet, before further discussion of industry types and main street revitalization, the group agreed that the Town needed to focus on its community engagement in conjunction with development. The Day 1 conversation on community engagement, and its necessary interwoven piece into Center’s long-term solution, influenced Day 2’s workshop and, ultimately, the final pitch.
Day 2

On the second day of Studio Workshops, the Center team focused on capitalizing on Center’s existing assets and how to use them to achieve Center’s long-term goal of town revitalization. The Center team also asked workshop attendees what they might recommend highlighting in the Town’s upcoming pitch and how Center could best market itself. The session concluded with emphasis on utilizing Center’s designation as an Opportunity Zone in main street revitalization, brownfield funding for assessment of the 90-acre parcel of land, and a pitch for a Community Outreach Coordinator employed by the Town.

Pitch

Town Manager Brian Lujan and SLV CHFA Community Relationship Manager Jeff Owsley pitched to a panel of funders, lenders, and investors. Lujan and Owsley pitched for tools Center and workshop attendees deemed as necessary for the town to succeed. These tools included funding for a Community Outreach Coordinator, technical assistance to formally assess the existing main street and parcel infrastructures, and branding, website, and social media guidance for local businesses. Town Manager Lujan emphasized that Center needs to get to work as what is done today will not just affect those in the next 5-10 years, but future generations in the following 50 years to come. Thus, Center is working toward long-term solutions that will guarantee the community’s viability. Following Center’s pitch, the panel shared their immediate feedback and ideas to assist the Town in overcoming its challenges.

After all Challenge communities gave their pitches, the panelists conferred and members of the Colorado Lending Source and the Equity Project awarded the $2,000 Colorado Challenge Program Consultation Prize to the Town of Center. The Town plans to use this award for a Youth Entrepreneurship Competition which is detailed below.
TEAM MEMBERS //

Brian Lujan, Center Town Manager
Lindsay Miller, CU-Denver SPA Student/Challenge Studio Coordinator
Jackie Hazelwood, CU-Denver SPA Student/Challenge Studio Coordinator
Jeff Owsley, Co-presenter of Center Pitch, San Luis Valley CHFA Community Relationship Manager
Caroline Trani, Center Challenge Studio Workshop Facilitator, CHFA Southern Colorado Community Relationship Manager
Tom Monaco, Director, San Luis Valley Small Business Development Center
Jesse Silverstein, Executive Director, Colorado Brownfields Foundation
Christy Doon, Department of Local Affairs, South Central Regional Manager
Paul Bindel, Digital Marketing Consultant, Doghead Creative
Chris Perkes, Urban Planner and Designer, DesignWorkshop Aspen
Marianne Stuck, Urban Planner and Designer, DesignWorkshop Aspen

BACKGROUND INFORMATION //

For most of Center’s history, it was fueled by a strong agricultural industry and boasted a vibrant Main Street. However, largely due to automation, the town has struggled to stay afloat, retain its citizens, and maintain a sustainable economy.

Center’s current residents are young and diverse. The town’s population is 2,214, it’s median age is 30 years, around 80% of its population is Hispanic or Latino, and 31% of individuals are below the poverty level with a median household income of $27,216.

Center needs to find a way to identify and capitalize on its existing assets and opportunities to stimulate its sleeping economy. With the right tools, financial assistance, and community support, the Town of Center can ensure that current and future generations have a place to call home.
Population: 2,214

Stakeholders + Partners:
● Town of Center
● Center residents
● Center businesses
● Center School District
● San Luis Valley Community Partners
● San Luis Valley Small Business Development Center
● San Luis Valley nonprofit organizations

Assets:
● Designated Opportunity Zone (Prospectus coming)
● Brownfield funding potential for 90 acre parcel
● Eight vacancies on two-block main street
● Location at the center of the San Luis Valley, proximity to other communities
● Great K-12 school district
● Beautiful, newly-renovated park on the main street just south of the central business district
● Proximity to Highways 285 and 112
● Water tank, grain elevators, and other infrastructure existing for farming opportunities
● Center Airport (designated as excellent airport for Unmanned Aerial Vehicles)
● 285 days of sunshine in Center
● Clean, well-kept downtown
● Strong faith-based community with deep historical and cultural roots
● Agricultural history related to food production

Obstacles:
● Lack of community engagement/involvement
● Remote location; while close to 285, lack of access to town itself; only going to Center if you want to go directly to Center
● Highest poverty rates within the San Luis Valley; persistent generational poverty
● Need for re-building, infrastructure, and beautification

FINDINGS + IDEAS //

Workshop Emphasized Findings
● Opportunity Zones for Main Street Revitalization
● Brownfield-based funding for land parcel assessment

Workshop Emphasized Ideas

Engage with Center and the San Luis Valley Community: Now that Center has an idea of its existing assets and opportunities, it can present them to the community for feedback and input. Center also needs to engage with the larger San Luis Valley community to determine how it can play a more impactful role in the Valley’s economic ecosystem. Additionally, another way to engage with the community might be through VISTA volunteers or CU-Denver Capstone projects as they could work through the school district to reach citizens who may not normally be engaged.

Develop a Brand and Marketing Strategy: Center needs to market itself as a place that is “open for business” to potential investors, entrepreneurs, and major industries that already do business or have a strong potential for doing business in the San Luis Valley. It also needs to develop an understanding of its identity so that it can market itself as an attractive place to live, work, and play.
While the steps below are ordered, most tasks can be completed simultaneously as each “step” is equally important and has the potential to impact Center’s economic development.

In order to capitalize on its assets and opportunities in pragmatic, sustainable, and equitable ways, the town needs to take these steps:

1. **STEP ONE** : Technical Assistance to formally assess existing buildings and 90-acre land parcel
   a. Inventory of Main Street Vacancies to: determine square footage, amenities, and necessary repairs
      i. Before Center markets its vacancies to outside businesses, the properties must be prepared/renovated as needed for rent or purchase
      ii. Apply for grant via the Rural Technical Assistance Program with the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade (Certified Small Business Community Initiative)
      iii. Use information based on upcoming prospectus of Center’s Opportunity Zone to apply for future grants
   b. Center needs formal assistance annexing and zoning the 90-acre parcel of land. It also needs to determine funding and cleanup opportunities for brownfield sites and explore creating metropolitan districts.
      i. File for a Site Assessment within the Brownfields Program of the Department of Public Health and Environment
      ii. Potential for securing up to $250,000 a year in statewide funding for clean-up and preparation of land parcel

2. **STEP TWO** : Hire a Community Outreach Coordinator
   a. Center would greatly benefit from a community engagement liaison to conduct extensive outreach to the existing community. The liaison can determine what kind of development the community wants and needs. He or she can also present opportunities to the community based on a realistic understanding of existing infrastructure and funding.
   b. Discuss with City of Lamar as they are a prior Challenge Studio, pitched for this position, and just hired a Coordinator for the City in January of this year.
   c. Apply for a grant to fund the salary of a Coordinator employed by the Town of Center
      i. Rural Community Assistance Corporation: Community Facility Loans
      ii. USDA: Rural Economic Development Loan and Grant Program

3. **STEP THREE** : Use $2,000 Challenge Studio Award to hold Youth Entrepreneurship Competition
   a. Partner with San Luis Valley Small Business Development Center for guidance and planning assistance
   b. Target youth ages 16-35
   c. Use $1,000 for cleanup on outside properties of the main street and award the other $1,000 to winner of competition
   d. Plan for the Competition:
      i. Community members will compete with ideas for businesses to fill vacancies on Center’s main street
      ii. Advertise small business competition for main street vacancy to high school students and community members
      iii. Host competition in one of the following locations:
         1. Main street storefronts/windows
         2. Park near main street
         3. Main street vacant buildings (pop-up shops)

4. **STEP FOUR** : Branding, website, and social media guidance for existing and future Center businesses.
   Center needs a stronger branding strategy and web presence. It needs a website that can market Center as open for business to outside entities, as well as help existing businesses market their individual assets to locals and visitors alike. This marketing strategy would include a stronger social media presence for Center and its businesses.
   a. Website for Existing and Future Businesses
i. Establish Community Based Principles that all Center businesses will adhere to
ii. Reach out to Civic Brand and Slate Communications for consultation on specific next steps.
iii. Persona based website:
   1. Live site- video profile; persona based website; marketing to businesses; live, work
iv. Helping businesses with their digital footprint
v. Outreach to future Center businesses- ran through brand principles to ensure community buy-in

5. **STEP FIVE : Electric Vehicle Charging station**
   a. Once businesses are established in Center, apply for grant to install electric vehicle charging station at park, old gas station, and other vacant areas in Center
      i. Apply to **Charge Ahead CO Grant** for funding
   b. Benefits of an EV Charging Station:
      i. Puts Center on the map as it will put the town on an app for all electric vehicle drivers coming through the San Luis Valley
      ii. It takes a half hour to charge one’s car: while waiting for charge, drivers could explore the Town of Center

**DESIRED OUTCOMES //**

1. Revitalize and expand downtown for local and external community enjoyment
2. Curate partnerships with San Luis Valley businesses and beyond
3. Sustainable community engagement
4. Establishing an industry in or nearby Center for long-lasting success of town

**COLORADO CHALLENGE PROGRAM OVERVIEW //**

The Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program is a unique team building accelerator focused on establishing a plan of work and proposal that engages public, private, and non-profit partners to address a significant community challenge over the course of twelve months. The Colorado Challenge works to transform the community’s challenge into an opportunity, to establish a proposal, financing approach, and team of community partners ready to implement. The program includes five phases of planning and development that will help our Colorado communities establish a plan for community-wide initiatives to foster sustainable community and economic development including public, private, and non-profit partners moving forward as a business-friendly destination for entrepreneurs and community initiatives.

Downtown Colorado, Inc. will continue working with Colorado Challenge Communities around the followings areas to drive progress in turning the Trinidad Challenge into an Opportunity.

- **Financing Approach:** Developing and presenting the proposal to a funders network for feedback and guidance. In the process, participating communities are connected with supporting resources and networks to help them get the job done.
- **Program Continuation:** Coaching and referrals through the project financing and implementation phases.

We invite all partners to continue working in this challenge as we move into deeper exploration and implementation phases.