CHALLENGE STATEMENT //

Rocky Ford’s most pressing challenge is building a sustainable job economy. The City has faced a decline in population over the past 30 years which has been attributed primarily to the lack of employment. The town was built on farming, ranching and manufacturing, and over the years, the evolution of technology and modernization has displaced the core employers and the evolution and consolidation of these industries forced many local businesses to close, and good jobs have declined as a result. In the 1990's, the decline continued as local retail businesses closed their doors due to competition from a nearby big-box retailer. The city is now faced with a challenge of building a sustainable job economy for the community.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF STUDIO WORKSHOP //

The 2020 Challenge Studio for Rocky Ford was conducted virtually due to COVID-19. Although the format was shifted online, there was a variety of participants attending from across the state including representatives from Rocky Ford, Otero County, La Junta several state agencies as well as other economic development professionals and stakeholders.

Initially the Challenge Studio was focused on the challenge of building an economy to support job growth, however, it was clear that Rocky Ford faced many short-term challenges due to COVID-19 that needed to be addressed. To stem a loss of sales-tax revenue and the potential for permanent closure of small businesses particularly in the service industries, studio participants gave suggestions to Rocky Ford. Some of the suggestions included ways the City might communicate and engage with the business community to assess their needs, connect them with resources, and to help them pivot towards innovation.

As the studio participants tackled the challenge of positioning Rocky Ford’s economy to emerge from the current situation stronger than before, the conversation focused on the need for a centralized and coordinated campaign for both stakeholder engagement and communication. Stakeholders such as
community organizations, the school district, churches, higher education institutions, the Small Business Development Center as well as regional and Otero County partners were all suggested as possible champions for a broader community outreach.

**Poll Questions**

Poll questions were asked throughout the virtual studio workshop to gather participants input. Here are the some of the top answers from participants.

### Poll Questions Answers

#### 1. What, if any, positives have come from disruptions in your community?
- Clarification of Community Priorities (15%)
- Strengthening of Working Relationships (46%)
- Emergence of Community Champions (15%)
- Innovations that can be Replicated or Scaled (15%)
- Other (8%)

#### 1. Which industry sector in your community do you expect has the best opportunity/chance to recover following the disruption?
- Retail (25%)
- Manufacturing (25%)
- Agriculture (33%)
- Service (17%)
- Other (0%)

### TEAM MEMBERS* //

**Studio Facilitator**
Scot Hunn, Hunn Planning

**CU School of Public Affairs Coordinator**
Patrick Walton

**DCI Staff**
Kylie Brown, Challenge Program Coordinator/Rural Outreach Coordinator
Katherine Correll, Executive Director

**Local Non-Profit Partner**
Duane Gurule, Small Town Project

**Rocky Ford City Staff**
Marty Lee, Economic Development Coordinator
Shannon Wallace, City Manager

**Public Sector Partners**
Tara Marshall, Southeast Regional Manager, Department of Local Affairs
Greg Thomanson, Rural Opportunity Representative, OEDIT
Pam Denahy, La Junta Tourism
Cynthia Nieb, Economic Development & Urban Renewal, City of La Junta
Danelle Berg, Otero County Economic Development

**Specialists/Consultants**
Mickie Lewis-Gemici, Southwest CO Small Business Development Center
Caroline Trani, Colorado Housing and Financing Authority
BACKGROUND INFORMATION //

Rocky Ford is a rural town in southeast Colorado located 165 miles southeast of Denver and 45 miles east of Pueblo on U.S. Highway 50. Rocky Ford is known for producing the world-famous Rocky Ford Cantaloupe and Rocky Ford Watermelon. Those world-famous watermelons are also the foundation of our local Arkansas Valley Fair, which is Colorado’s oldest continuously running fair, and boasts an annual attendance of 16,000 people who come for a week of fun celebrating the diverse cultures of the area and outstanding agricultural community with horse races, stock shows, a carnival and rodeo; fiesta and Watermelon Days are also special parts of the celebration.

The name Rocky Ford, as the story goes, came from the spot where pioneers crossed the Arkansas to safety, avoiding quicksand in other areas of the river. Once a town that thrived as a manufacturing and agricultural economy. The loss of manufacturing plants over the past 30 years has decreased the population nearly 60% and led to a town with high percentage of vacant homes and commercial buildings.

The community does not always see the opportunities in Rocky Ford, young adults who leave often don't return, and visitors do not always know what the town has to offer. Community leaders believe that there is a solution besides attracting a large company. Some of the same technologies that have crippled the economy present opportunities for new growth. Remote work and automation, which moved jobs to larger cities, could entice higher tech workers from expensive urban centers back to Rocky Ford. At the same time, local training programs could generate new entrepreneurial activity where the barriers to entry may be lower than in other parts of the state.
Demographics
- Population: 3,828
- Median Household Income: $32,260*
- Percentage of Population with Incomes Lower than Poverty Line: 22.4%*

Stakeholders + Partners
This key list of stakeholders and partners was identified as a group that needs to be engaged and involved to address this challenge.
- City of Rocky Ford
- Small Businesses
- Local Schools and School District
- Community Members
- Agriculture/Farming Community
- Small Town Project
- Community Organizations (Churches, Non-profits, youth groups, etc.)
- Frontline Businesses
- Chamber of Commerce
- Local and Regional partners: Otero County, City of La Junta, State Agencies
- Otero County Junior College
- Small Business Development Center

*Data from the Census Bureau American Community Survey.  
https://datausa.io/profile/geo/rocky-ford-co
Assets

- The serene, rural atmosphere and great schools and prep sports teams make it a great place for raising families.
- A high affordability index, friendly community culture.
- High-performance broadband Internet could appeal to people looking to relocate away from the hustle and bustle of urban living.
- The town's Grand Theatre, which is run by volunteers, is the longest running movie theater in the state.
- In 1988, Rocky Ford began the Arkansas Valley Balloon Festival, held each year on the weekend with the first Friday in November.
- Rocky Ford’s city owned community space, Idea Place.
- Arkansas Valley Fair (Est. 1878), Colorado’s oldest continuously running fair.

Short-Term Obstacles Relating to COVID

- COVID-19 related business closures.
  - Service, hospitality, and retail industry are the hardest hit.
  - Lower sales-tax revenue.
- Building a marketing and communication plans for businesses.
- Helping businesses access COVID-19 relief funds.

Long-term Obstacles

- Attracting and retaining human capital.
- Building a skilled workforce pipeline.
- Connecting with school districts and local education institutions.
- Regional and county collaborations.
- Infrastructure to support a remote workforce.
- Long-term funding opportunities.
- Coming out of the COVID-19 crisis with a stronger commercial district than before.

FINDINGS AND IDEAS //

Centralized Communication: Creating contact list to prompt a dialogue with the business community to better understand their needs, provide updates, and highlight resources. Seek businesses and stakeholders not already on Rocky Ford communication lists.

Connecting Businesses with Resources: Provide information on COVID-19 relief funding and services, access to business coaching/mentorship programs, and connecting them with skills-based support.

Innovation and Adapting: Share best practices for businesses to move their inventories and services online as well as information on effective platforms and leveraging social media. Research resources for technical and marketing support for an online presence.
**Use Technology to Innovate Rocky Ford Experiences:** Capitalize on the pivot to online/remote learning and business practices to find ways to create virtual community events and initiatives (art shows, youth events, buy local campaigns on social media, etc).

**Community Dialogue:** Create a platform for two-way dialogue with community organizations and stakeholders to have an opportunity to express their needs and give input on Rocky Ford strategies. The dialogue can be prompted by a survey or community engagement campaign.

**Cultivate Buy-In:** Find opportunities to re-focus the narrative on Rocky Ford’s future towards asking community stakeholders for their commitment in moving forward the economic development strategy. This effort can complement input on community needs to shift the responsibility from “you” to “us” and provides an opportunity for students and youth to become more invested in the City’s future.

**Why I Love Rocky Ford:** Building on the cultivation of community buy-in, a campaign highlighting and showcasing Rocky Ford “wins”, or its assets is a way to continue momentum and reinforce hometown pride. This campaign would not only aim at increasing retention of Rocky Ford’s current workforce but lays the foundation for attracting future employers and employees.

**Communicating the Message:** Be creative in finding opportunities and stakeholders to prompt dialogue and communicate the campaigns. Groups and individuals such as faith leaders, non-profits, youth groups, the chamber of commerce, schools and institutions of higher education are all trusted members of the community that can champion dialogue and encourage buy-in.

**Local and Regional Partnerships:** Take advantage of the resources available at the county and regional level while cultivating stronger relationships with stakeholders outside of Rocky Ford. Be intentional around collaborations and joint strategies with Otero County, La Junta, Otero County Junior College, CSU Pueblo, and other area leaders.
**NEXT STEPS //**

1. **STEP ONE:** Build on the existing database of contact information for business and community stakeholders.
   - Identify gaps in representation of industries and community groups.
     - Conduct visioning survey and outreach to businesses and community stakeholders to obtain feedback and contact information.
   - Find a central point of contact to own communication lists.

2. **STEP TWO:** Communicate resources to address immediate needs of the business community.
   - Information on state, federal funding sources as well as nonprofit grants.
   - Access to skills-based support services (i.e. online marketing experts), business coaching/mentorship opportunities and contingency planning.
   - Highlight how businesses are innovating and using online platforms to pivot during COVID-19.

3. **STEP THREE:** Create a Rocky Ford communications working group.
   - Identify group members from stakeholder analysis (businesses, city employees and community members, youth).
   - Working group will be tasked with creating the framework for a campaign promoting community dialogue, include media platforms and other means of communication, and identify community champions to message the campaign.
   - The campaign should include key questions:
     - What does the future of Rocky Ford look like to you?
     - How can get involved in building the future of Rocky Ford?
     - What do you love about living and working in Rocky Ford?

4. **STEP FOUR:** Develop an action plan for sharing out progress and feedback with stakeholders and community members.
   - Highlight the use of community response and interests in forming economic development strategies.
   - Use DCI template to identify vacant buildings downtown and the owners and identify potential uses and incentives to communicate with owners/buyers.
   - Maintain a centralized point of contact for community to continue to provide input.
   - Broaden the outreach to a diverse range of community stakeholders and demographics.
   - Leverage local and county agencies as thought partners in identifying areas of collaboration around regional communication.

**DESIRED OUTCOME //**

A Rocky Ford that is better connected to the needs and vision of the whole community will be the foundation for the type of authentic community engagement and stakeholder buy-in that is critical in moving forward long-term strategies aimed at building a sustainable job economy.