



**GATEWAY AND  
NATURAL AMENITY  
REGION INITIATIVE**

# **BOOMTOWN: AMENITY MIGRATION IN THE RURAL WEST AND THE RISE OF THE "ZOOM TOWN"**

**WEBINAR SERIES SUMMARY & FOLLOWUP INFORMATION**

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## WEBINAR SERIES SUMMARY & FOLLOWUP INFORMATION

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Utah State University

**Organized by:**

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## SERIES OVERVIEW

With their small size, quaint feel, and outdoor recreation opportunities, many gateway and natural amenity region (GNAR) communities have experienced population growth as a result of “amenity migration,” for years. The COVID-19 Pandemic has only turned up the heat with the rise of the “Zoom Town”.

To help get information and tools to GNAR communities during this unprecedented time of change, the GNAR Initiative hosted an online webinar series titled “Boom Town: Amenity Migration in the Rural West & the Rise of the ‘Zoom Town.’” The series brought together leading scholars, organizations, and practitioners to explore recent academic research, community experiences, and strategies related to amenity migration and related challenges and opportunities.

**You can [view the full series of recordings](#) on the [Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism’s YouTube Channel](#).**

## ABOUT THE GNAR INITIATIVE

[The GNAR Initiative](#) leverages research, education, and capacity building to assist communities, land managers, and others in gateway and natural amenity regions throughout the West in preparing for and responding to planning, development, natural resource management, and public policy challenges, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Initiative is an affiliation of university faculty, government and state agencies, non-profit organizations, and community leaders. It is based in the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University.

## SERIES REACH & IMPACT :

30 STATES & PROVINCES ENGAGED

71 COMMUNITIES & REGIONS

623 SESSION ATTENDEES

400+ SESSION VIEWS ON YOUTUBE



## SESSION 1: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN GNAR COMMUNITIES

This interactive session with Dr. Danya Rumore shared the key findings of a survey of planning and development challenges in over 1,500 western gateway communities, recently published in the [Journal of the American Planning Association](#). It engaged participants in dialogue about the findings, what they mean for GNAR communities, and what GNAR communities need to respond to the planning and development challenges they face.

### SYNOPSIS

**Abstract from: “Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities”**

**by Philip Stoker, Danya Rumore, Lindsey Romaniello & Zacharia Levine**

Small towns and cities outside of national parks, scenic public lands, and other natural amenities throughout the western United States are becoming increasingly popular places to live and visit. As a result, many of these gateway communities appear to be experiencing a range of pressures and challenges. In this study we draw on the results of in-depth interviews with 33 public officials and a survey of more than 300 public officials to shed light on the planning and development concerns across western gateway communities. Our results indicate that gateway communities throughout the western United States are experiencing a range of planning and development challenges, many of which seem atypical for small rural communities, such as challenges associated with housing affordability, cost of living, and congestion. These challenges seem to be more related to population growth than increasing tourism and stand out in stark contrast against the fact that these communities strongly value and identify with their small-town character. Our findings suggest gateway communities are doing a variety of things, some quite innovative, to address their planning and development challenges but often feel overwhelmed, behind the curve, and in need of additional capacity and planning support.

### RESOURCES

- TO WATCH THE FULL WEBINAR, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO READ THE FULL J.A.P.A. RESEARCH PAPER, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO ACCESS TO POWERPOINT SLIDES FOR THIS PRESENTATION, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO SEE THE FULL PARTICIPANT CHAT FOR THE SESSION, [CLICK HERE](#)

## SESSION CHAT HIGHLIGHTS

***The interactive session involved participants responding to prompts through the chat function in Zoom. This is a condensed list of highlights from the chat. To see the full chat and additional prompts, a link to the full participant chat for this session can be found [HERE](#).***

**PROMPT: What are your reactions to these findings about growth, tourism, and development in GNAR communities?**

- 100% of chat participants were NOT surprised
- “I think this year has been shocking for us smaller communities. Elko has started experiencing some of those “over-tourism” issues we’ve only heard about from Aspen/San Francisco/L.A. and wasn’t prepared.”

**PROMPT: What innovative things have you seen GNAR communities try? Information on specific communities and efforts are welcome so we can follow up to get more information!**

- Check out ISC’s report “Regional Collaboratives for Climate Change – A State of the Art”
- Aspen has worked hard since the 1970s to set growth limits; they also have a really fantastic affordable housing program... even though demand will always outstrip supply.
- Crested Butte paradise park neighborhood for housing
- Maximum chain store ordinance
- My organization and I can really help with jobs and connecting to resources for income issues. USU Extension, Rural Online Initiative. We teach how to work remotely and access jobs and income opportunities remotely including freelancing and Entrepreneurship.
- Sun Valley - shuttle transport for employees and skiers - how to fund private/public transit
- Gunnison County (CO) Sustainable Tourism and Outdoor Recreation (STOR) Committee
- Park City - paid parking, employee shuttles

- Chaffee County Common Ground, Colorado.
- We have a regional West Central Mountains Economic Development Council which shares resources, funds, and regional initiatives.
- Tahoe Home Connection - matchmaking between STR owners and long-term renters
- Net zero in Park City, UT
- Street closures for outdoor dining this summer
- Jackson WY has housing mitigation requirements and growth caps.
- Mono County, CA - we have Short-term rental policies specific to each unincorporated community
- Gardiner, MT is trying to establish an investment cooperative that would buy housing for year-round residents. Slow going because these are community volunteers that run businesses, have full-time jobs, etc
- Our remote work initiatives in Utah are very innovative. We have been doing it since 2018 before remote work was cool!
- Grants offered to homeowners willing to deed-restrict their rentals to long-term
- Becoming a Main Street Community has been a game changer. The National Main Street provides terrific support for small and large communities.
- Douglas County Nevada – AgriHousing
- Voces Unidas de la Montanas - a newer org in the RFV to help bring the (historically underrepresented) Latinx community’s voice into regional governance and decision making
- Fruita’s collaboration/work space
- Growth boundaries (like Oregon’s urban growth boundary) that receive regular updates.
- Jackson’s joint County/Town comp plan, recent rezone to downzone county & transfer density to the town
- City donating land to affordable housing developments!

## SESSION CHAT HIGHLIGHTS (CONT)

- Whitefish has adopted inclusionary zoning - so far not much housing produced
  - Increasing lodging tax on STRs to support affordable housing. Exploring land trust and IndieDwell container homes as well as ADU incentives.
  - VMT traffic analysis in Park City, JH, and State of CA
  - Inclusionary and workforce housing ordinances
  - Community involvement is crucial. In WV, I would go for City/Town Meetings, and then hang around for a while with the Mayor/Council members and interested citizens - we will trouble shoot, brain storm in an informal manner that resulted in developing trust to the extent when one was received as one of them. Although there was one case where we had to be escorted for safety reasons by the Mayor and the Sheriff.
  - McCall's locals housing toolkit!
  - Moab - road widening, expanded parking, new land trust housing development, deed restrictions, parklets, expanded outdoor rec infrastructure, and more
  - One thing that's unique to Aspen is that amenity migrants and locals don't really compete within the same housing market. So, there's is mainly just a win with new home buyers. They have a RETT tax which is huge.
- PROMPT: What key opportunities do you think COVID-19 presents for GNAR communities?**
- Proactive planning is more urgent.
  - Rethink how much and what kind of tourism we actually want.
  - People are learning how to work from home or remotely. We are seeing a lot of people who have moved away to get a career job, coming back into our communities.
  - With so many people moving in, perhaps a more diverse population, more diverse political views, more open-mindedness for progressive ideas?
  - Capture tax income from remote workers.... effectively use them as an asset rather than a burden.
  - We have increased "residents" now and increased recreational tourism so they bring economic benefits if we can meet the increased need.
  - Investment on solutions from those moving in.
  - Unused office space could present opportunities for affordable housing.
  - Opportunity to weave the fabric of community going forward, have a community visioning process that is inclusive, etc.
  - Empty 2nd houses are full and makes the neighborhood more lived in.
  - People are re-discovering their "backyards" so hopefully they value the environmental resources.
  - Extension of tourism/economic activity into shoulder/off season
  - Normalizing remote work for SOME of the jobs, which shows potential for helping alleviate congestion.
  - How to be more self-sufficient
  - Opportunity to reevaluate our strategic planning because everything has changed.
  - When people can work from home, they can live where ever they want; which will often be in GNAR communities. This will give many such communities new talent, new income, new ideas, new vigor, etc...
  - Opportunity to rethink and reboot all systems. Focus on improving the quality of life for citizens.
  - Potential opportunity for remote workers to open up 'satellite' offices that could potentially make remote jobs with larger companies available for the long-time local residents.
  - Highlight rural needs in statehouse

## SESSION CHAT HIGHLIGHTS (CONT)

### **PROMPT: What has your community learned over the last 7 months?**

- Regional communication has been HUGE. We have a regional task force of business, government and healthcare leaders that was started in March and we can respond quickly to short and long term issues.
- We need Economic Development Diversity.
- Key to communication & planning is leadership, and if the leadership isn't engaged and taking on that primary role, the community is in trouble.
- We need more housing and building as well as rental options.
- Learning that social divisions are inflamed and we need to address that in order to build consensus on planning issue solutions.
- Planning and building systems need to migrate to be digital.
- New environmental health staff on the frontlines to help enforce mask rules and help businesses stay open and engage public/visitors have worked really well.
- From my research, and participant-observations, and consultancies in small high amenity communities, very little is being done about AM, perhaps principally because its not understood and partially because there is little opening to explain it at the local, regional and state/provincial levels. In my 40 years experience with AM, where there is opening for educating its typically and quickly dumbed down to "tourism". It seems that much of the response is due to public planners (where they exist) have not been educated to compute this.
- That are residents can be proactive on solutions once they slow down and stop thinking some one else is taking care of the issue eg pop up neighborhood chats - trail cleanup - etc..
- To some extent, our community has seen a "v shaped recovery" - we went from over 20% unemployment in April back down to under 5%. This is largely due to our local economy's relationship to building and maintaining and remodeling high-end homes. It has shone a spotlight on just how reliant we are on real estate development, etc. To me, this illuminates what a vulnerability that is.
- Issues like STR's have been exacerbated recently -- our community chose to put off this difficult conversation for years and the consequences of that choice have been painful.
- Build a reciprocal collaborative planning processes with neighboring jurisdictions including other locals (cities, towns, counties), and state and federal agencies.
- Tourism can lead to amenity migration.
- I think the blurriness of amenity migration is really important to recognize. Amenities may tip decisions among multiple places/job offers based on amenities, but they're not there solely for the amenities.
- Tough decisions to enact strict zoning ordinances is needed. Bonding for open space to preserve areas for future generations. Growth boundaries and connect growth to resources - water, etc.
- Boulder City, NV has a very strict growth control system and they have been successful in growth management and development.



## SESSION 2: RESEARCH Q&A – CURRENT OUTLOOKS ON AMENITY MIGRATION IN THE INTERMOUNTAIN WEST

Are the population cycles in gateway communities always a boom or a bust? Dr. Don Albrecht from the Western Rural Development Center at Utah State University joined researchers from across the country to share insights into the current population, mobility, and migration trends in western gateway communities and their surrounding regions. The team discussed how COVID-19 may influence these trends and the implications of amenity migration on how we all live, work, and play.

### PANELISTS INCLUDED:

Don Albrecht, Ph.D. - Director, Western Rural Development Center

John Cromartie, Ph.D. - Geographer, USDA Resource and Rural Economics Division

Megan Lawson, Ph.D. - Headwaters Economics

Peter Nelson, Ph.D. - Professor, Middlebury College

## RESOURCES

- TO WATCH THE FULL WEBINAR, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO SEE THE FULL PARTICIPANT CHAT FOR THE SESSION, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO JUMP TO THE POWERPOINT SLIDES FOR THIS PRESENTATION, [CLICK HERE](#)



## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

***Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to ask questions of the panelists. A selection of these questions is included here.***

**QUESTION:** What do peaks and valleys in non metro line reflect?

**ANSWER:** Many factors contributed and their relative importance shifted over time. There was a lot of industrial restructuring that led to urban out-migration in the 1970s, combined with relatively healthy growth in rural industries (farming and mining). The rural rebound in the 1990s was led by amenity migration and retirement booms, especially in the West. Lots of other factors could be listed.

**QUESTION:** What do we know about a sort of Creative Class demographic (as a development category demographic) moving to recreation amenity geographies that “track” moves into urban cores. i.e. Do we know if these are millennial/retiree lifestyle-choice phenomena. i.e. you either like mountain biking or urban loft living-you’re mobile, but your taste culture and voting habits determine where you go? How much does taste and identity drive this?

**ANSWER:** That is absolutely a driving factor in amenity migration. Since the 1990s some (not all) segments of the workforce have become more footloose. Some prefer to move to the hipster neighborhoods in Brooklyn, yet others now have the flexibility to move where they have access to fly-fishing, skiing, etc. So for the more privileged, they are more able to act on their tastes/identity.

**QUESTION:** Is there a standard definition for what constitutes a “recreation” county?

**ANSWER:** Yes, more information about recreation counties can be found on [Headwater’s website](#).

**QUESTION:** Any correlation between broadband capacity and growth in these communities?

**ANSWER:** Access to broadband is very much a factor. People making the types of moves we are talking about are discriminating shoppers, they systematically assess the attributes of any given community before moving and having broadband is a really key factor. Starlink will have speeds of 150MBS... this could dramatically impact the future migration to rural areas.

**QUESTION:** What is difference between Micro and Rural?

**ANSWER:** The community is classified as “Rural” vs Micropolitan.

## SESSION 3: COMMUNITY Q&A – PERSPECTIVES ON AMENITY MIGRATION

Amenity migration is being experienced by communities across the Intermountain West in very different ways. The perspectives on amenity migration vary as widely as do the communities, creating a continuum of excitement and concern. Leaders from communities across this continuum shared their insights, experiences, and strategies for managing the impacts of amenity migration.

### PANELISTS INCLUDED:

Kaden Figgins - Planner and Economic Development Director, Garfield County, Utah:

Emily Niehaus - Mayor, Moab, Utah:

Aaron Qualls - Director of Planning and Community Development, Sandpoint, Idaho:

Ray Brown - Executive Director, Sanders County Community Development, Montana:

Pete Muldoon - Mayor, Jackson, Wyoming

## RESOURCES

- TO WATCH THE FULL WEBINAR, [CLICK HERE](#)



## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

*Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to ask questions of the panelists. A selection of these questions is included here.*

**QUESTION:** How are your town's managing the increased need for broadband?

**ANSWER:** Blackfoot Telephone acquired a Broadband Initiative Grant and our community is getting fiber to every household.

**QUESTION:** Are you experiencing heightened xenophobia from locals to new residents and visitors and if so how are you trying to manage the us and them mentality?

**ANSWER 1:** Yes, there is definite old-timer vs. new timer tension. There is also a surprising turn where the "old" new timers (ie: early 2000's) are now on the same page with the original old-timers.

**ANSWER 2:** In Lake Tahoe, voters have banned AirBnb type rentals from resentment of tourists in their neighborhoods.

**QUESTION:** How are your cities or communities limiting/restricting or not short term rentals as a way to help ensure affordable housing and multi-generational functioning neighborhoods, and community support for transportation, schools, and other public or community investments etc.?

**ANSWER:** Whistler, Canada has established a 'bed cap' which is embedded in our official community plan and is a maximum build capacity for residential and tourist accommodations, which supports our ability to protect economic and environmental sustainability.... I'm unsure of similar tools you may have in the US, but happy to share. We are also in the process of developing a carrying capacity analysis to help guide our evolution over time... and help balance community needs with tourism economy.

**QUESTION:** The panelists have talked about the need for planning. Another challenge many GNAR communities seem to face in doing forward-looking planning (in addition to limited capacity and burnout) is that planning is a "bad word" in many rural areas/counties. Have the panelists experienced this? How are they dealing with this?

**ANSWER 1:** We actively engage in the community and challenge perceptions. If we continue to allow the loud voices to control the room discussion then we're doing our community a disservice. Unless you can get community support most directives will go undone.

**ANSWER 2:** One of the challenges is that here in Bonner County, it is relatively simple to develop on 2 ½ acres with a well and septic. Investors want to put money to work, so when faced with a year + long planning approval process in a place like Sandpoint vs. 4 months in the county, unfortunately, sprawl will accelerate. Towns need to do everything possible to absorb the growth otherwise, with good intentions, their stringent standards will push development exactly where it should not occur.

## SESSION 4: A TALE OF TWO TOWNS: THE SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES APPROACH IN ACTION IN GARDINER & DEER LODGE, MT – PRESENTED BY: FUTURE WEST

Gardiner, MT had a rapidly growing population and was struggling to manage it. Deer Lodge, MT had a shrinking population and was struggling to reverse it. Both communities partnered with Future West to work through the “Successful Communities” approach to community planning and strategizing. Future West shared these examples of their work and talked about the critical need for communities to come together, discuss and strategize for their future before it’s too late.

### PRESENTERS:

Dennis Glick, Director & Co-founder, Future West

Randy Carpenter: Successful Communities Lead, Future West

### RESOURCES

- TO WATCH THE FULL WEBINAR, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO WATCH “THE HIGH DIVIDE” VIDEO BY FUTURE WEST, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO SEE THE SLIDES FROM THIS SESSION, [CLICK HERE](#)



## SESSION 5: WHAT COMES NEXT? COMMUNITY PEER EXCHANGE & LISTENING SESSION

This peer-to-peer learning session was an opportunity for gateway and natural amenity communities to get together and discuss what the increasing trend of amenity migration means for their towns and regions, and discuss strategies to move forward. Over 40 GNAR community members from across the Western U.S. and Canada were in attendance. Participants shared insights, challenges, and strategies from their community and learned from other communities around the region.

### RESOURCES

- TO SEE THE FULL PARTICIPANT CHAT FOR THE SESSION, [CLICK HERE](#)
- TO ACCESS A CONTACT LIST OF OTHER GNAR COMMUNITIES WILLING TO TALK AND SHARE IDEAS ABOUT GNAR CHALLENGES, [CLICK HERE](#)

### SESSION CHAT HIGHLIGHTS

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**PROMPT: What can you give or share today or to the GNAR Network more broadly?**

- 20+ years of experience/learning
- Sharing what Grand County is doing to educate the visitor coming to Moab
- What to do, not do, to regulate short term rentals
- 42 years of urban and regional planning experience in Washington, Oregon and Utah.
- Share national park gateway experiences/successes/challenges.
- I'll share GNAR links with my fellow planners in west central Idaho!
- A historic perspective having been in ski towns since 1968
- I have a lot of ideas about how we can improve transportation options.
- Lessons learned. Paths forward. Support -technical
- Our Eagle County response to WF housing past 3 years
- Grassroots advocacy around planning experience
- I have a lot of experience as an independent conservationist working in the public process.
- Example housing initiatives.
- National perspectives, policy opportunities, federal and state funding and assistance potential
- A perspective as a Former AirBnb Investor, and Now Zoom Town employee
- Past experiences and networks - perhaps how I've addressed issues; private sector experience (CSR/stakeholder engagement)
- How we support our local community through grants and supporting local infrastructure. Not very experienced in this field but can share ideas
- Approaches to regional/local transit expansion; expansion of ped/bike infrastructure; development of public trail

## SESSION CHAT HIGHLIGHTS (CONT)

- network over multiple land jurisdictions; inclusionary zoning; limits to short term rentals
  - Share lessons learned and studies done by CAST with GNAR
  - Initiating an Emerging Economies study in SW Alberta to see what opportunities are provided via proximity to special area (Castle parks)
- PROMPT: What did you learn that might be relevant for the rest of the group?**
- Conservation and smart development
  - A task force with a long term member commitment is a great idea
  - Getting a shared vision for growth is key for good outcomes
  - There are tools that are working out there: Land Banks, Deed Restrictions, Land Trusts, Zoning.
  - If you have a lodging tax, increase it to 10%! Make sure short term rentals are treated the same - inspections, etc. as hotel lodging. Find common ground.
- PLAN AHEAD! We are always going to be attractive
  - The idea of organizing regional county "associations."
  - We are not alone and there are many good ways to approach challenges.
  - How Vail InDeed program can be applied to BC new community
  - Yup. We're not alone.
  - Universities are good resources and may facilitate outreach or coordination between different jurisdictions - feds, state, country, municipality
  - Your failures are recommendations for others future
  - Growth comes with tradeoffs. You don't get the economic growth without the increase in visitors or population. How are you going to take advantage and cope with the change?
  - Very helpful experiences from two others.
  - Network, regional planning, engage newcomers rather than shun them, join groups like this one to get ideas?





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**EXTENSION**   
**UtahStateUniversity**