

Oroville-Tonasket Opportunity DRAFT#2

With an estimated 12,100 residents, the Oroville-Tonasket area of Okanogan County is oriented to the natural resource and travel features of the Highway 97 / Okanogan River corridor.

As of the 2020 U.S. Census, Oroville was home to 1,795 residents with another 1,103 residents in Tonasket. Unincorporated and rural communities account for about three-quarters of the population of this NE Okanogan County area.

Oroville-Tonasket is served by the north-south Highway 97 travel corridor with access east to Ferry County via SR-21. West-bound access is possible by Highway 3 on the Canadian side of the border or on the U.S. side via SR-20 from the Omak-Okanogan area. The area supports varied natural resource activity and has benefitted from tourism, especially from neighboring Canada.



Oroville-Tonasket: the two incorporated communities of NE Okanogan County

- Area outlined in orange comprises the U.S. Census County Divisions (CCDs) for the larger areas served by these two communities.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Population growth is occurring but at an uneven pace across this NE county area:

- The greater Oroville-Tonasket area has experienced a population gain of close to 10% since 2010, an overall faster rate of growth than for the rest of Okanogan County .
- Population growth is more rapid for the unincorporated rural area than the two cities; of the two cities, Tonasket has experienced a greater percentage increase than Oroville.
- At close to 48 years, the median age of Oroville-Tonasket area residents is older than the nearly 43-year median age of all Okanogan County residents.
- At just under \$45,400, the annual median household income of the Oroville-Tonasket area is 16% below the comparable county-wide median figure.
- New housing is being built at a more rapid rate than county-wide – with an estimated 9% of existing homes built from 2014 to present.

LABOR FORCE & EMPLOYMENT

About 53% of Oroville-Tonasket area residents age 16+ are currently in the labor force – a participation rate that is somewhat below the county-wide rate of 55%. Of added note:

- As of 2019 (pre-pandemic), businesses in NE Okanogan County employed 2,150 workers.

- From 2010-19, wage and salary employment in the Oroville-Tonasket area declined by 21%, with job losses noted across a range of employment sectors ranging from natural resources to retail trade and government, partly offset by job gains as in wholesale trade, transportation, warehousing and administrative/waste management activities.
- With close to 28% of county-wide population, the Oroville-Tonasket area accounted for only 15% of county-wide employment pre-pandemic (typically for wage and salary jobs covered by unemployment compensation).
- However, the NE county area has a relatively high rate of self-employment partially offsetting the covered job loss experienced in recent years.
- Adults employed in the Oroville-Tonasket communities tend to be older (55 and over), with lower educational attainment and earning less than counterparts working elsewhere in Okanogan County.

While not available at the local community level, more recent 2020-21 data region- and county-wide indicates that employment has yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. Natural resource, hospitality and local government employment have been most adversely affected. Conversely, job counts now exceed pre-pandemic levels in construction, distribution, retail trade, and business services. In effect, recent experience may reinforce job trends already underway for the Oroville-Tonasket communities even prior to the COVID pandemic – albeit with new upside potential indicated for sectors ranging from construction to retail trade and business services.

COMMUNITY ASSETS & PRIORITIES

Assets of the Oroville-Tonasket area cited by community stakeholders include outdoor recreation, agriculture, grocery stores and a mill for Oroville – together with a mix of health care, agricultural, logging and retiree relocations plus good community participation for Tonasket.

Challenges are for new leadership with concerns ranging from drug abuse to lack of primary industry.

Community priorities include:

- Desire for increased community engagement and positive opportunities for youth
- Industry recruitment, downtown improvement and expanded tourism opportunity
- Town and parks maintenance, guide services, trails and destination development

When asked what a **“thriving economy”** would look like, a respondent from Oroville highlighted priorities for “businesses able to keep consistent days and hours year-round, life and energy in our community.” A respondent from Tonasket suggests “thriving primary industry and all the trickle-down industry from there, (also) not having a majority of the population needing to travel to another town to work.”

OPPORTUNITIES

As the more populated of the two north county communities, the vast NE county geography served by **Oroville** encompasses a base of employment that is strongly oriented to natural resource and transportation and warehouse industries as well as to tourism activity – as the NCW and U.S. Highway 97 gateway to Canada.

While smaller in population, the **Tonasket** area has strong representation of jobs in

retail and health care. Tonasket also serves as the jumping off point from Highway 97 to SR 20 and associated access east to Republic in neighboring Ferry County.

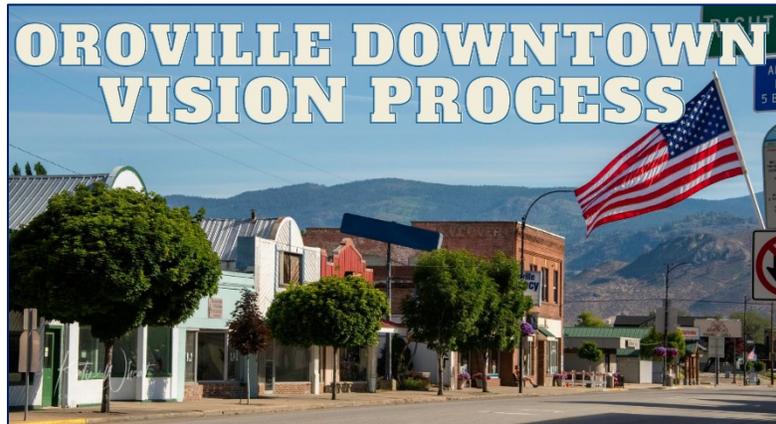
Separated by 17 miles but taken together, each community complements the other, creating greater critical mass than when viewed independently. Looking to the future, opportunities are likely linked to natural resource sustainability coupled with visitor and new resident attraction.

NEXT STEPS

Building from strategic visioning as recently conducted for downtown Oroville coupled with initiative of Tonasket shown by pool funding, next steps for these two communities could be to:

- Start with a steering committee to create and coordinate implementation of a **strategic vision and action plan** – drawing on the expertise of interested businesses, citizens and civic leaders
- Focus on identified **needs and opportunities** as for improved community design and aesthetics, business recruitment, and targeted marketing for visitors and new residents
- Look for opportunities to engage the community for near-term wins, **building momentum** for longer term initiatives that may require both local and outside funding

Both here and throughout the NCW region, neighboring communities are encouraged to work collaboratively. As two Okanogan River cities accessed by major travel corridors, Oroville and Tonasket stand to benefit as the two most northern cities in Okanogan County with Canada as a next door neighbor. Collaboration focused around tourism enhancement and downtown revitalization may serve to more readily leveraging local with outside expertise and resources.



A community process to reimagine the future of Oroville's downtown, led by the Oroville Chamber and NCWEDD

- Per Oroville Chamber of Commerce website
<https://orovillechamberofcommerce.wildapricot.org/Oroville-Downtown>

GO NORTH!

Of the many diverse communities of Okanogan County and the NCW region, the Oroville-Tonasket area is most distinctive for its proximity and direct access to the trade opportunities with the Canadian Okanagan **immediately north**. The economic pause occasioned by COVID related travel restrictions has prompted a re-thinking of economic and community development priorities. This has led both communities to re-focus inward as well as outward.



With volunteer support, the Tonasket Pool Association with volunteer support raised \$950,000 to build a new community pool opened in August 2017.

- Photo per NCW Community Foundation web site:
<https://cfncw.org/2017/08/04/tonasket-builds-community-pool/>

As one stakeholder observes, for **Oroville** this shift has involved more initiative to foster “a community united to bring out the best we have to offer.” For **Tonasket** this has suggested greater attention to longer term sustainability – in activities ranging from entrepreneurial agribusiness to town maintenance.

As a **regional partnership**, the Okanogan County Economic Alliance and North Central Washington Economic Development District (NCWEDD) encourage the identification and submittal of *shovel-ready* or *potential shovel-ready* economic and community development projects for project review and ranking.

Top-ranked projects will receive grant writing and administration support from the Alliance and NCWEDD. The closer to *shovel-ready*, the *better the opportunity* for successful funding.

This *opportunity profile* has been prepared by the North Central Washington Economic Development District (NCWEDD) serving communities of Chelan, Douglas and Okanogan Counties.

Data is compiled from sources including U.S. Census, Washington Office of Financial Management (OFM), Washington Employment Security Department (ESD), and the nationally recognized private firm Claritas.

For further information as to business and investment opportunities and economic development programs for the Oroville-Tonasket communities and the greater NCW region, contact Alyce Brown, NCWEDD Executive Director via phone at 509-899-9321, email director@ncwedd.com

Or contact Roni Holder-Diefenbach, Executive Director for the Economic Alliance of Okanogan County, phone 509-826-5107, email rholderdiefenbach@economic-alliance.com