

Twisp-Winthrop Opportunity **DRAFT#2**

With over 6,400 residents, the area served by Twisp-Winthrop is geographically vast but with a growing population located in close proximity to the SR-20 North Cascades Highway corridor.

As of the 2020 U.S. Census, Twisp was home to 992 residents with another 504 in Winthrop. More than three-quarters of the area's population lives outside the two incorporated communities and over 90% of residents are situated within what the U.S. Census terms as the Methow Valley portion of NW Okanogan County.

The communities of Twisp and Winthrop are accessed primarily by SR-20 with connections west to the Puget Sound but with the roadway extending west of the Methow closed in winter months. The valley, mountains and rivers are known for active tourism and year-round recreation together with diverse local agricultural activity – and with a recent influx of in-migrants.



**Winthrop & Twisp
at the heart of the Methow Valley**
- Areas outlined in **orange** are the U.S. Census County Divisions (CCDs) of the Methow Valley and Early Winters comprising all of western Okanogan County.

DEMOGRAPHICS

Driven largely by strong housing demand even through the pandemic, related demographics of the Twisp-Winthrop area can be summarized as including the following:

- The greater Twisp-Winthrop area encompassing the large Methow Valley/Early Winters geography has experienced a population gain of about 11% since 2010 – with growth more fast-paced than county-wide and nearly comparable to the more rapid rates of population increase for the 3-county North Central Washington (NCW) region.
- While smaller in total population, Winthrop has experienced a much more rapid percentage rate of resident increase than Twisp.
- At more than 54 years, the median age of Methow Valley/Early Winters residents is considerably older than the 43-year median age of all Okanogan County residents.
- At about \$64,800, the annual median household income of the Twisp-Winthrop area is 20% above the county-wide median.
- With an estimated 7% of valley housing built from 2014 to present, the pace of housing development is more rapid than what has been experienced county-wide but not as fast-paced as for the 3-county NCW region.

LABOR FORCE & EMPLOYMENT

An estimated 50% of Twisp-Winthrop area residents age 16+ are currently in the labor force – a participation rate that is well below the 3-county North Central Washington (NCW) region rate of 60% – also below the Okanogan County rate of 55%. Of added note:

- As of 2019 (pre-pandemic), Twisp-Winthrop and other Methow-Valley/Early Winters area businesses employed over 1,750 wage and salary workers.
- With 12% of Okanogan County's wage and salary jobs as compared with 15% of county-wide population, the Twisp-Winthrop area job base looks under-represented. This is at least partially offset by the highest rate of self-employment in the county.



Entrepreneurial and artisanal spirit in Twisp is exemplified by Fiber, a local yarn, needle and gift shop – with specialties including roving, spinning, felting and local farm products, housewares and gifts.

- Photo courtesy of the Cascade Loop Association.

- However, from 2010-19, wage/salary employment in the greater Methow Valley/Early Winters area increased by more than 30% as compared with minimal job growth county-wide and more than double the NCW job increase of 14%.
- Strong job growth of 30% or more has occurred in sectors including natural resources (agriculture and other), construction, manufacturing, retail trade, administrative services, arts/entertainment/recreation, accommodation/food services, and public administration.
- Compared to all of Okanogan County, adults employed in the Twisp-Winthrop area tend to be either younger (age 29 or less) or older (55+) and with higher levels of educational attainment but lower earnings – including workers commuting into the valley.

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 may now exceed pre-pandemic levels in construction, distribution, retail trade, and business services. Tourism impacts could be mixed – more positive for retail but perhaps less so for dining/lodging hospitality (with limited workforce) coupled with recent wildfire concerns.

COMMUNITY ASSETS & PRIORITIES

Assets of Twisp-Winthrop include hospitality, outdoor attractions, the U.S. Forest Service, fisheries, local schools, sustainable agriculture and self-employment work ethic. Cited by a local stakeholder is a tradition of “working together to solve big problems and preserve this place.”

Challenges include a lack of affordable housing including rentals and seasonal housing. This is the least diverse subcounty region, with the oldest population, and lowest active labor force participation. Those working locally are more likely to be in lower paid service jobs.

Going forward, **community priorities** are centered on:

- Working together to understand area challenges and seek affordable housing solutions
- Improving worker pay and benefits to better match the costs of Methow living
- Addressing issues of climate change and wildfire risk – also improved internet service

A **thriving economy** will involve “food and housing security and the opportunity to thrive doing meaningful work ... compensated enough to enjoy the beauty of where they live.”

OPPORTUNITIES

With a tradition of volunteerism, residents already have a head-start in thinking about the Methow Valley’s future. In 2021, the community non-profit *TwispWorks* completed *A Comprehensive Economic Study of the Methow Valley* as “the beginning of a new conversation about the future of the Methow.” The study is intended to serve as a potential launch point to determine a path forward to “increase economic and cultural vitality in the Methow Valley.”

As the larger community, **Twisp** offers opportunity for added business and cultural activities reflecting home grown values. With a distinctly more tourism-focused downtown and nearby destination resort in Sun Mountain Lodge, the **Winthrop** community is more externally focused. Best case, the two communities working together can reflect complementary approaches to serving local and non-local interests – building a more sustainable valley-wide future.

NEXT STEPS

Perhaps starting from the TwispWorks study as a point of reference, next steps could be to:

- Convene a steering committee to create and coordinate implementation of a **valley-wide vision and action plan** – drawing on the expertise of interested businesses, citizens and civic leaders
- Focus on identified **needs and opportunities** covering topics including affordable housing and workforce development together with initiatives for community resilience.
- Look for opportunities to achieve near-term wins both locally and valley-wide, **building momentum** for longer term initiatives that may require both local and outside funding.

TRADITIONS IN A NEW ECONOMY

Of the diverse regions of NCW and Okanogan County, the Methow Valley/Early Winters area is the most dissimilar – in terms of both demographics and employment. The Methow Valley is growing, with higher income households and educational attainment. The area is more reliant on tourism than the rest of the county – but with strong overall job growth.



Visitors information station in Winthrop with concierge service for customized North Cascades trip planning

- Photo courtesy of Cascade Loop Association

Facing challenges of reliance on out-of-area workers and resident incomes externally sourced

coupled with greater health care needs of an older population, the communities of Twisp, Winthrop and the rural Methow Valley likely will continue to chart their own distinct path for economic and community development going forward.

Opportunities and outcomes will be most favorable as localized initiatives are pursued, when possible, in collaboration with interests of surrounding Okanogan and NCW communities.

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 Twisp-Winthrop 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