

# Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities

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## ABSTRACT

**Problem, research strategy, and findings:** 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.

**Takeaway for practice:** Our study highlights the importance of effective and proactive planning in gateway communities. It also suggests that to do forward-looking planning and to respond to the challenges they face, many gateway communities will need additional planning support and tools. We highlight gateway communities here to provide a platform for future efforts aimed at assisting these small, rural communities in protecting the qualities that make them such special places to live and visit amid the planning and development pressures and challenges they face.

**Keywords:** gateway communities, natural amenities, rural, small town, workforce housing

Small towns and cities outside of national parks, scenic public lands, and other natural amenities throughout the western United States attract people from all over the world because of the quality of life and unique experiences they provide. It is therefore not surprising that many of these western *gateway communities*—including places such as Jackson (WY), Moab (UT), and Aspen (CO)—are becoming increasingly popular places to live and visit.

Unfortunately, increasing visitation and development pressures appear to be creating a variety of “big-city” challenges for many gateway communities throughout the West, including traffic and congestion, a lack of affordable housing, environmental degradation, and loss of community character (Dunning, 2005; Leung & Marion, 2000; Long et al., 2012). Although these challenges have been to some extent documented in popular press and through case studies of particular towns, there is currently a dearth of empirical data on the

extent and nature of planning and development challenges in western gateway communities. This lack of understanding limits progress toward generalizable solutions, strategies, and guidance for addressing the increasingly acute pressures affecting these natural amenity-rich communities.

We address this gap by examining the key planning and development-related challenges experienced by western gateway communities, which constitute a significant proportion of all communities in the western United States. We do so by analyzing results from in-depth interviews with 33 public officials and a survey of more than 300 public officials in gateway communities across the western United States.

Our research focuses specifically on gateway communities in the western United States for a number of reasons. Communities near major natural amenities throughout the United States have experienced planning and development challenges associated with their

popularity as places to live and visit (Marcouiller et al., 2013). However, western gateway communities are distinct in that they are in some of the most rapidly growing states in the nation. They are also typically much farther away from major urban areas than gateway communities in the eastern part of the country. There is also considerably more public land in the western United States and thus there are more rural western communities near major natural amenities. Further, the politics and planning context of the western United States is strikingly different from that of midwestern and eastern states. Accordingly, we focus this study specifically on gateway communities in western states. Because coastal communities have very different types of natural amenities and economies than inland communities, we draw a western boundary on the western side of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges. Although we only examine the experiences of noncoastal western gateway communities, our study likely has relevance for gateway communities elsewhere in the country, although that merits further study.

In the following section, we review prior scholarship on planning and development in gateway communities. We then discuss our methods, explaining how we identified gateway communities throughout the West and our use of interviews and a regional survey to explore challenges in these places. We then present the findings and our conclusions. Our key takeaways from this study are the severity and pervasiveness of housing, cost of living, and transportation problems, as well as the need for additional research, planning support, and tools to assist these places in preparing for and responding to the challenges they face.

### **A Need to Better Understand Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities**

Observation, popular press, and numerous case studies suggest that many western gateway communities have become increasingly popular places to live and visit. This, in turn, appears to be driving a number of planning and development challenges. However, academic scholarship has little to say about these unique rural communities and the nature, extent, and pervasiveness of the challenges they face.

What literature does exist is spread across multiple disciplines, ranging from geography, rural sociology, and recreation and tourism studies to public policy, public administration, wilderness management, and political science (Hunter et al., 2005; Kurtz, 2010; Leung & Marion, 2000; Mair & Reid, 2007; Majumdar & Lentz, 2012; P. B. Nelson & Hines, 2018; Rothman, 1998; Stephanick, 2008; Ulrich-Schad & Qin, 2018). Further and

problematically, academic literature lacks a consistent way of describing and defining these communities. Researchers studying these towns and cities have used a range of terminology, including amenity communities or regions (Abrams et al., 2012; Hunter et al., 2005), recreation communities (Chipeniuk & Nepal, 2005), rural or rural American West (Gosnell & Abrams, 2011), Rocky Mountain West or New West (Beyers & Nelson, 2000), high mountain regions (Loffler & Steinicke, 2006), amenity destinations (L. Nelson & Nelson, 2011), resort communities (Long et al., 2012; Ooi et al., 2015), and rural communities (Darling, 2005; P. B. Nelson & Hines, 2018). Often these terms are not clearly defined; when they are, there is inconsistency in language and definitions across studies and disciplines. As a result, it is difficult to find and collate research on gateway communities, and existing scholarship has been highly fragmented.

Following Howe et al. (1997), Marcouiller et al. (2013), and Bergstrom and Harrington (2018), we advocate for the use of the term *gateway community* as a way of describing small rural towns and cities near major public lands, lakes, scenic rivers, and other notable natural amenities. We do so for a number of reasons. First, this term seems to be widely understood by the communities themselves and the people who work in and with them. In addition, this term distinguishes these places from other rural communities while being inclusive of communities near a wide range of natural amenities. Unlike terms such as *resort community* or *destination community*, gateway community also importantly encompasses communities that have not yet become tourism and amenity migration hotspots as well as those that have. We do not see being a current destination or reliance on a tourism economy as being a core part of categorizing gateway communities because a) many gateway communities have not yet experienced growth and tourism but might, whether or not they want to, as a result of their surrounding desirable natural assets, and b) communities in gateway regions often experience overflow of growth and visitation as traditional tourism hotspots become built out or overly affected.

Prior scholarship on gateway communities, regardless of the terminology used to describe these places, suggests that many of these communities are experiencing the interconnected phenomena of amenity migration, population growth, lack of affordable housing, effects on spillover communities, and conflicts between new and long-term residents (Beyers & Nelson, 2000; Ghose, 2004; Howe et al., 1997; Huq, 2016; Marcouiller et al., 2013; M. Park et al., 2019; Smith & Krannich, 2009; Winkler et al., 2015). Some studies have illuminated transportation concerns in gateway communities, including seasonal traffic congestion and parking problems (Dickinson & Robbins, 2007; Dunning,

2005; Mace, 2014). Others have identified issues associated with loss of community character, natural resource management, and economic inequality due to growth and changes in visitation (Leung & Marion, 2000; L. Park & Pellow, 2011; Sherman, 2018).

Though research has begun to document these dynamics, prior studies have mostly examined individual case studies or a handful of communities (e.g., Darling, 2005; P. B. Nelson & Hines, 2018). Studies more regional in nature have looked only at specific issues or have studied issues across all rural communities, not specifically focusing on gateway communities (e.g., Kondo et al., 2012). Moreover, when broader perspectives are incorporated into existing research on gateway communities, quantitative data are rarely used to supplement qualitative information (e.g., Chipeniuk, 2004).

In sum, prior studies give us significant reason to believe that many gateway communities throughout the West are experiencing interconnected planning and development challenges as they become more popular places to live and visit. However, prior research has not systematically examined the nature, extent, and pervasiveness of planning and development challenges in gateway communities across the West. Our study addresses this gap.

### Assessment of Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities

In light of the fact there is no commonly used term for describing gateway communities, it is perhaps not surprising that there was no pre-existing database or list of western gateway communities to draw on for this study. Therefore, our first step was to identify western gateway communities.

Drawing on existing literature, as well as personal observation, on-the-ground work with western gateway communities, and consultation with scholars in rural sociology, rural planning, leisure and tourism studies, and geography, we define gateway communities as communities of 150 to 25,000 people that are

1. within 10 linear miles from the boundary of a national park, national monument, national forest, state park, wild and scenic river or other major river, or lake and
2. further than 15 miles from a census-designated urbanized area by road.

We suspect the exact metrics used to define gateway communities can be further refined; however, after a process of validating and honing these criteria (see the [Technical Appendix](#)), we have confidence this is a solid

starting point for quantifiably identifying gateway communities.

Using these criteria, we conducted a GIS analysis and identified 1,522 western gateway communities ([Figure 1](#)). In 2018, these communities had an average population of 2,035 and a combined population of 3,045,769 people. They constitute 30.6% of all communities in the U.S. Mountain West and 61.1% of those under 25,000 people.

From this database, we selected 25 gateway communities for our interviews using a diverse case approach. Interview communities were chosen to include representation from across all western states, a range of population sizes and levels of tourism development, and proximity to different kinds of natural amenities (such as ski areas, desert, scenic rivers, and different kinds of public lands). We conducted in-depth interviews with a total of 31 public officials (including elected officials, planners, and others) from these places and two individuals representing regional entities that work with gateway communities. The interviews were semistructured and conducted in person or by telephone. We recorded and transcribed interviews into memos, which were validated by the interviewees, who were given the opportunity to provide corrections or clarifications. We coded and analyzed interview data using ATLAS.ti (2020) software.

Based on insights from the interviews, we developed a questionnaire to administer to public officials in all of the identified gateway communities. The questionnaire sought to assess perspectives on valued community characteristics, planning and development challenges, strategies to address identified challenges, and resource and capacity needs. The questions were a combination of Likert-scale questions, multiple choice, and open-ended questions; see the entire instrument in the [Technical Appendix](#). Our research team obtained publicly available email addresses for mayors, public works directors, town clerks, transportation officials, county commissioners, planners, and other public officials in as many western gateway communities as possible; in total, we obtained 1,278 email addresses, which constituted our survey sample frame. Before sending it out, we tested the questionnaire with a sample of local planners and academics, using their feedback to refine the survey. We administered the questionnaire using Qualtrics software. Recipients were asked to complete a questionnaire on planning challenges and opportunities in western gateway communities. We received completed survey responses from 333 individuals representing 264 distinct communities (26% response rate). We analyzed survey results using SPSS (IBM, 2019).

We expected that contextual factors such as community population, growth rates, and average income might correlate with and help explain survey findings.

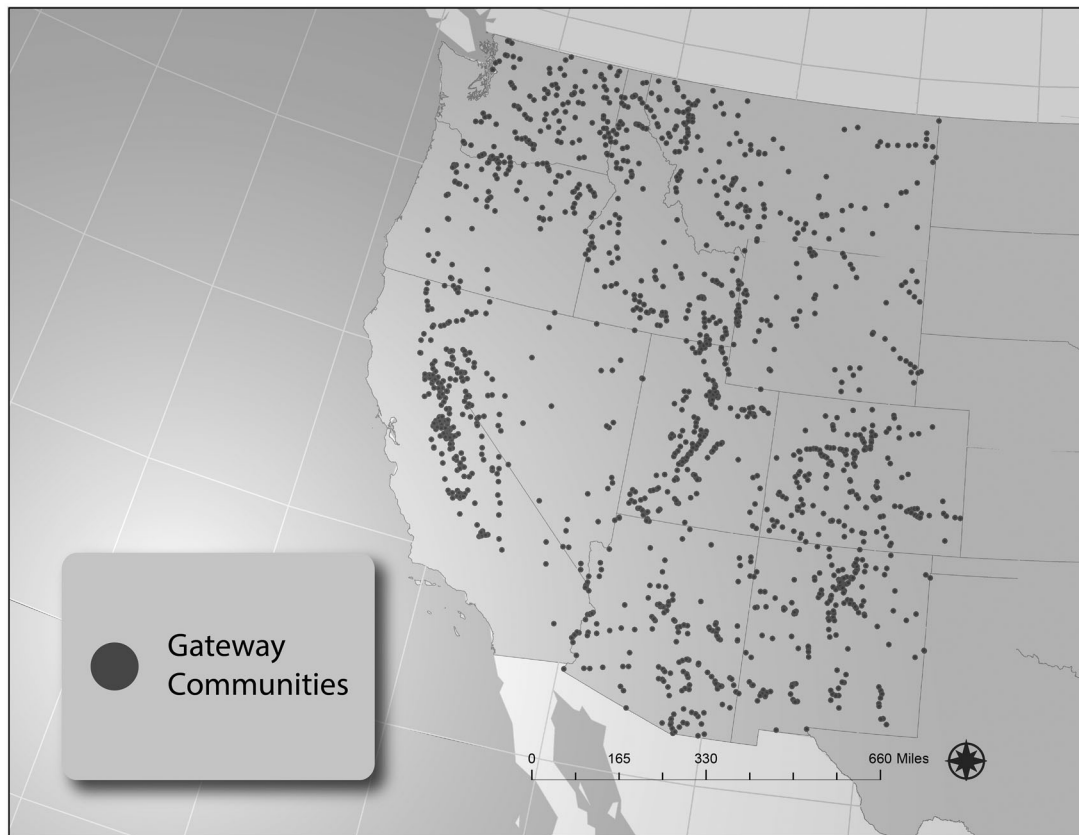


Figure 1. Locations of gateway communities ( $n = 1,522$ ).

**Table 1. Survey sample characteristics.**

Variable	Sample (SD)	Gateway communities (SD)	Rural Mountain West (SD)	National rural (SD)
Population	4,895 (8,215)	2,035 (3,410)	605 (605)	712 (637)
Per capita income (\$)	27,206 (10,399)	25,945 (11,780)	26,141 (14,278)	26,609 (14,741)
Median rent (\$)	880 (269)	810 (264)	789 (296)	757 (308)
Median housing value (\$)	222,903 (147,994)	191,886 (142,872)	186,302 (172,275)	133,199 (168,098)
Population growth rate (%)	8.2% (31.4)	6.8% (33.3)	7.8 (44.1)	8.4 (36.5)

Source: All data from the 2018 ACS 5-year estimates at the census-designated place geography (Manson et al., 2019).

We therefore obtained American Community Survey data for population growth, housing, and income for the communities that responded to our survey that were census-designated places (Table 1). Of the 1,522 gateway communities in our database, 22 were not census-designated places.

Additional details about our methods and analysis, including our questionnaire and interview protocol, can be found in the [Technical Appendix](#).

In considering the findings of this study, it is important to keep a number of things in mind, each of which is further explained in the [Technical Appendix](#).

First, our interview and questionnaire respondents are public officials in western gateway communities; it is possible that residents, tourists, or even other public officials in these communities feel differently about the types and severity of challenges a community is facing. Second, 44 communities that responded to our survey were not in our original gateway community database but were included in our questionnaire analysis because they fit our idea of a gateway community and respondents self-identified as representing a gateway community. Third, there is the potential of selection bias in our questionnaire responses. Compared with the population

of all gateway communities we identified, our sample on average had higher population, per capita income, median rent, median housing value, and population growth rates (Table 1). These differences are likely explained by the fact that many gateway communities are so small they do not have paid public officials, and therefore we oversampled larger communities. In addition, smaller communities may not be facing as many pressing issues, making them less likely to complete the survey. Because there are some differences between characteristics of our sample population compared with the target population, we chose not to use inferential statistics with this data set. Nonetheless, our survey sample does contain a diversity of gateway community types as demonstrated by the high standard deviations presented in Table 1. To improve the external validity of this study's findings, we intentionally selected our interview sample to reflect a range of gateway communities. The interview findings closely align with survey responses, giving us confidence that our survey data are reflective of gateway communities throughout the West.

## Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities

A number of key findings emerged from our analysis of survey, interview, and census data.

### ***Many Western Gateway Communities Are Increasingly Popular Places to Live and Visit***

According to census data, communities represented in our survey increased their populations by an average of 8.2% between 2013 and 2018, growing faster than rural Mountain West communities and rural places across the nation (Table 1).

In addition to obtaining objective measures of community population growth, we asked respondents to indicate how much growth had occurred in their communities in the last 10 years. This helped us get a sense of growth in tourism and part time/seasonal populations, which are not measured by census data. Most survey respondents reported growth in part-time/seasonal population (59.7%) and the number of tourists visiting (86.2%), with 44.3% of respondents saying tourist numbers have increased substantially, 21.2% saying part-time/seasonal population has increased substantially, and 15% saying year-round population has increased substantially.

Interviews reinforced the finding that many gateway communities are growing, with interviewees from 16 of the 25 communities represented in our interview sample explicitly attributing this growth to the desirability of the community's surrounding natural amenities

and related opportunities and quality of life. As one town planner put it:

It seems to me that people who are moving here REALLY want to be here. . . . I get a lot of calls from people who say, "I've been coming to your town for 10 years and I want to figure out a way to move there." I think these people really understand and appreciate the culture here. That may be changing a little with the growth and change in the surrounding region.

Interviewees from every community in our interview sample suggested growth is driving various planning and development challenges in their community. In their words, "The population of the town has significantly increased over the last 30 years. With more people, the town needs to formally provide more services," and "[Our community] has always been a tourist destination, but the pressures on our community have grown substantially while I've been here. . . . We've seen lots more housing challenges, lots more traffic congestion, pressures on our infrastructure, lots of interest in special events that bring a ton of people to [the town], just the overall crush of humanity coming in."

The challenges emerging from growth and increased visitation and the related struggle this can create for gateway communities were evident throughout our survey and interview results, as discussed below.

It is important to note that not all western gateway communities are growing. Some gateway communities in our sample are decreasing in population (13%), and a sizable minority of questionnaire respondents indicated declines or no growth in year-round and part-time populations (33% and 40%, respectively). This suggests that not all gateway communities are "destined" to grow, and many may be shrinking or experiencing very little growth.

### ***Western Gateway Communities Value and Identify With Their "Small Town-Ness"***

The growth most gateway communities are experiencing juxtaposes against the fact that these places tend to value and identify with their "small town-ness" and related community character. When survey respondents were asked what characteristics their community cares about, 93.8% of respondents said they think a small-town feel is important for more than half or all of their community. The same was true for maintaining community character and identity (Figure 2).

Our interviews reinforced this finding. A strong majority of interviewees said their communities value maintaining a small-town identity, community character, and "authenticity." They also commonly noted that growth and increased visitation could threaten these qualities and create community tension. In the words of

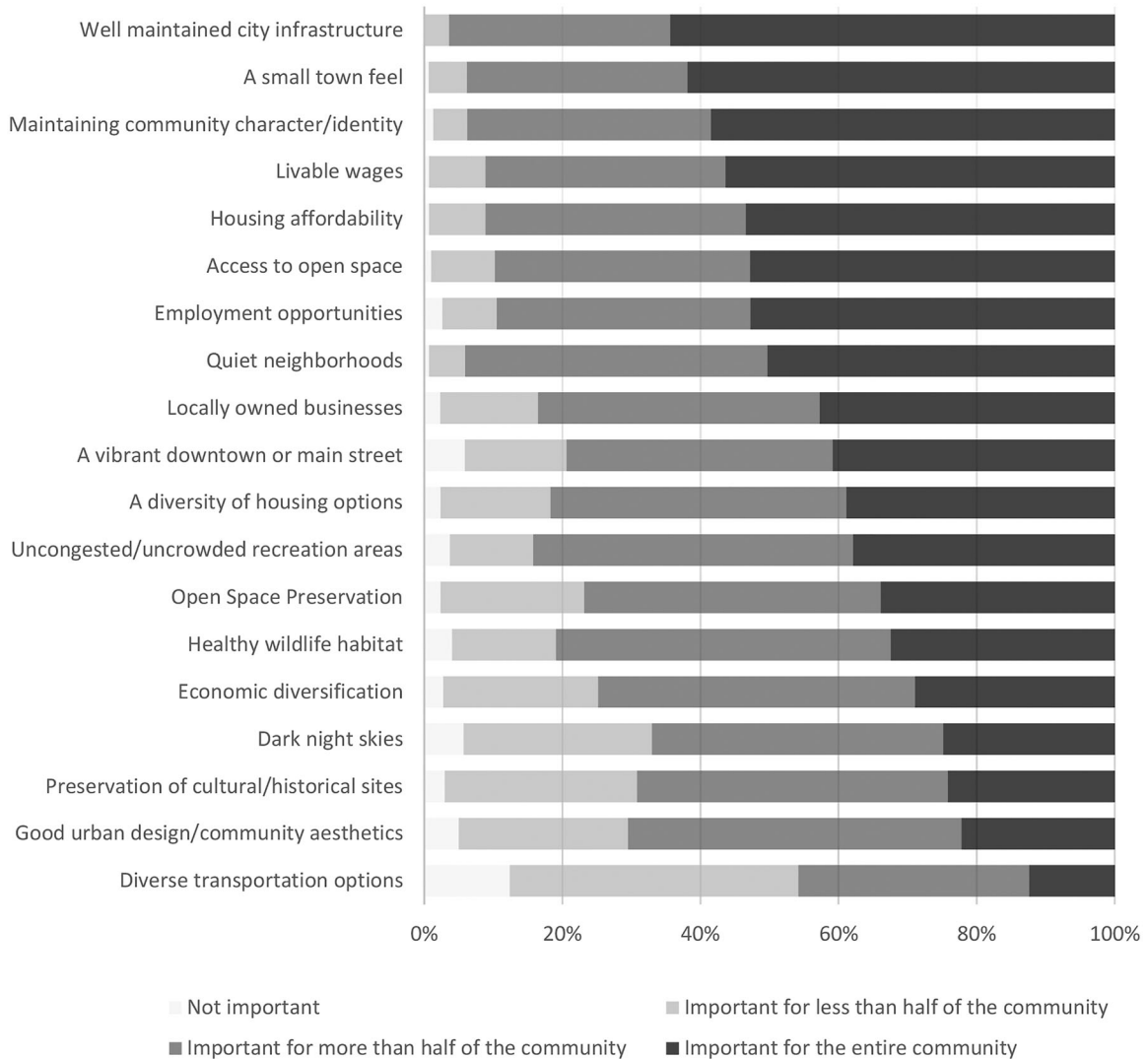


Figure 2. Reported importance of various community characteristics.

interviewees from two different communities, “I definitely see further growth, but will we grow in a way that maintains our character and authenticity?” and “We saw backlash from the community following a burst of upzone requests and big, new buildings. It spurred questions and conversations about the impacts of development on [our town’s] small-town character.”

**Housing and Cost of Living Are Key Concerns for Many Gateway Communities**

One of the most striking findings of this study is how pervasive and urgent housing affordability issues are across western gateway communities. As shown in Figure 3, 82.7% of survey respondents said that housing affordability is moderately to extremely problematic for their community, with 32.7% saying it is extremely problematic. In addition, 26 interviewees representing 24 of

the 25 communities in our sample identified housing affordability as a key issue for their community.

Results from the interviews shed some light on the severity and potential causes of the issue of affordable housing. The community and economic development director for one community said,

Right now I think affordable housing is the biggest thing. Not just affordable housing, but actually livable affordable housing; right now housing is a crisis and there are a lot of people who are living in substandard housing because there are no other options.

A planner from another town echoed these sentiments, saying, “Our essential workers struggle to find housing already, let alone our wage earners.” Interviewees attributed this to many things but often highlighted destination-driven second homeownership and short-term

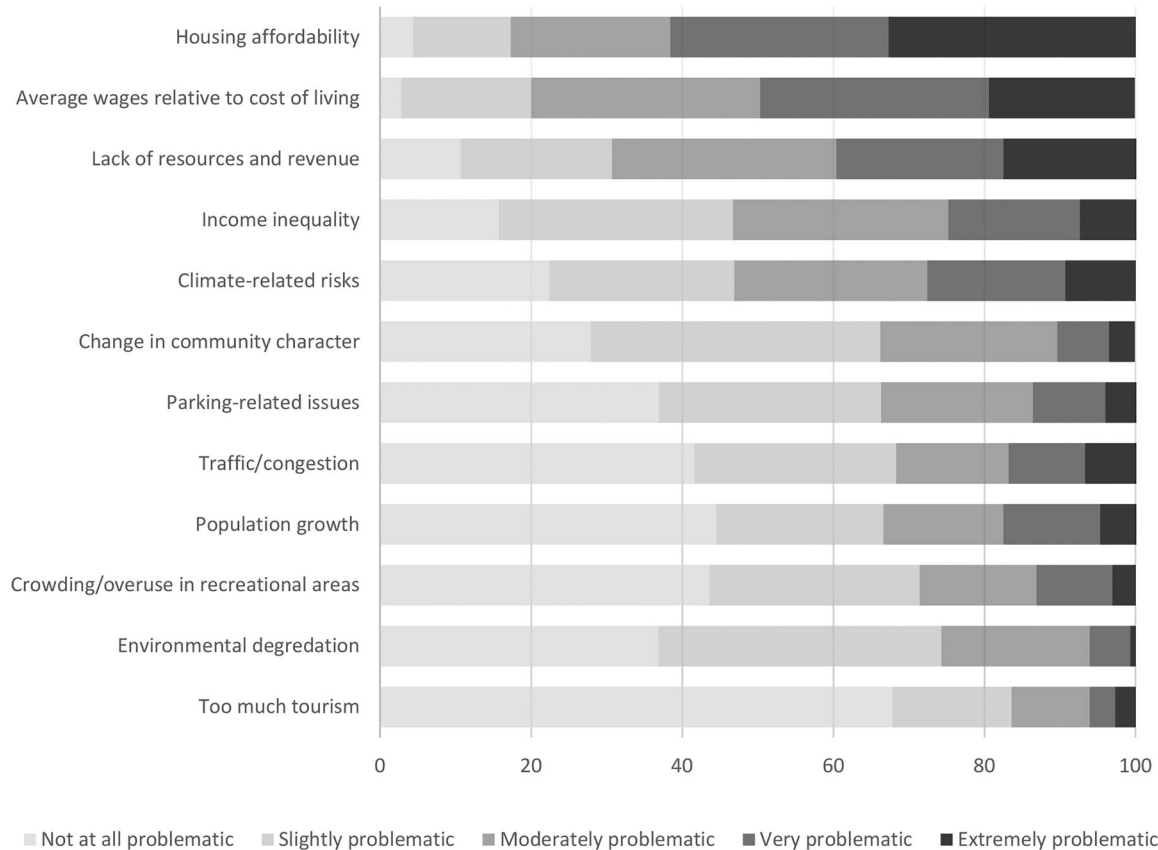


Figure 3. Severity of challenges in gateway communities.

rentals as a key source of concern, saying things such as,

Second homeowners from San Francisco [CA] and Seattle [WA] are coming in with a lot more capital and so they're driving up the housing costs for everyone else in the valley. That's why three-quarters of our housing stock is second homes.

Moreover, many (37.5%) questionnaire respondents indicated that part-year residents occupy at least 25% of the housing stock in their communities.

A strong majority of interviewees noted their communities are trying to tackle housing concerns with varying levels of success and that this is an ongoing challenge. For example, the community development director from a developed gateway community explained,

Housing is something we've always struggled with. Although we have a great affordable housing program, there are people who want to live here who can't. As a community, we're trying to figure out what that means, and what does the next phase of the housing program look like.

Survey data tell a similar story. Survey respondents indicated their communities are taking a wide range of actions to address housing but with limited success. When asked, "What is your community doing to provide affordable housing?" respondents said allowing or encouraging accessory dwelling units (38.1%); relaxing land use and zoning regulations (25.8%); developing publicly owned land for affordable housing (19.8%); offering density bonus incentives (18.3%); permitting tiny homes (18.3%); offering impact fee or other fee waiver/deferral incentives (11.7%); requiring and administering income-based deed restrictions (11.7%); using inclusionary zoning (10.5%); supporting or using a community land trust (6%); and providing rental or ownership subsidies (6%). Despite many of these communities taking action to address housing affordability issues, 49.2% of respondents said their community is not doing enough to address housing challenges and only 21.3% said they think their community is definitely doing enough or doing almost enough.

Related to housing affordability concerns, 49.6% of survey respondents said that average wages relative to cost of living are very problematic or extremely problematic for their communities (Figure 3). As one interviewee, a community development director, said, "The

local workforce is simply priced out. It is both lack of rental housing and lack of permanent housing. . . . [P]eople who work here can no longer afford to work here. . . . [I]t's becoming the haves and have-nots." This concern is reinforced by the finding that more than half of survey respondents said that income inequality is a moderate to severe issue for their community (Figure 3).

These findings align with our analysis of census data. As Table 1 shows, the median rent and median housing value across our survey respondent communities is higher than for all rural Mountain West communities. Though this could arguably be somewhat offset by a higher per capita income, it is important to keep in mind our findings about income inequality and the related fact that many employees in gateway communities are working basic service and tourism industry jobs, which are typically low paying.

### **Gateway Communities Face a Range of Other Development Concerns**

Housing, cost of living, and income inequality were not the only issues identified as troubling for western gateway communities. As Figure 3 shows, about 70% of respondents said lack of revenue and resources is moderately to extremely problematic for their communities. More than 20% of survey respondents said that climate-related risks, change in community character, parking-related issues, traffic/congestion, population growth, crowding/overuse in recreational areas, environmental degradation, and too much tourism are moderately to extremely problematic for their communities. Moreover, in response to an open-ended question about other planning and development challenges, respondents repeatedly identified a range of additional issues, such as challenges associated with insufficient infrastructure, labor shortages, and short-term rentals.

Although we cannot do justice to all of these findings here, one thing that stood out is that more than 25% of survey respondents said that both parking-related issues and traffic and congestion are moderately to extremely problematic for their communities. This might be at least in part explained by the fact that some gateway communities experience massive influxes of people at certain times as a result of nearby national parks, ski areas, and other natural amenities, although that merits more assessment.

As with housing, western gateway communities are experimenting with a wide range of approaches for addressing transportation concerns and improving mobility for locals and visitors. Whereas some of these transportation strategies are typical for rural communities, such as providing sidewalks and free parking, others are things more common in larger communities. For example, when asked what transportation options

exist in their communities, survey respondents said paid public transportation (33%), protected bike lanes (22.4%), free public transit (18%), paid public parking (8.5%), bike share programs (6.8%), e-bike share programs (1.6%), and carpool lanes (0.8%). We heard a similar diversity of transportation interventions from interviewees. Of note, most interviewees (22 individuals representing 18 communities) described transportation planning as a regional-scale issue, noting that congestion and mobility issues are regional in nature and that addressing transportation issues will require regional solutions and regional planning.

### **Perceptions on Tourism, Growth, and Quality of Life**

Too much tourism was identified as moderately to extremely problematic by 16% of survey respondents (Figure 3). Along similar lines, nearly 20% of respondents said there is a moderate amount to a great deal of tension between residents and tourists in their community. These numbers might seem low considering that crowding issues and tourism-related tensions are commonly discussed in previous literature on gateway communities (Chipeniuk & Nepal, 2005; Smith & Krannich, 2009). However, this finding aligns with the theory that tourism development is a positive thing until it reaches a certain point, at which point local residents may perceive the costs as balancing out or outweighing the benefits (Latkova & Vogt, 2012).

Interviewees spoke to this tension between a tourism economy and resident quality of life, with many expressing this as a "love/hate relationship" and a "double-edged sword." In their words:

[Tourism] is a love/hate relationship. Everyone realizes to some degree that we're reliant on it, but that doesn't stop people from hating tourists. We don't really have the infrastructure in place to deal with high-demand weekends, so in those times it feels like we're being bombarded.

I think [tourism] is the double-edged sword. We need the tourism dollars, but at the same time, during the peak days, we do get complaints about the tourists. There's the frustration with tourists who are renting out single-family homes as though they were hotels. That's a new trend. There's the frustration that they're loud, obnoxious. They do what they want and it's impacting the neighbors and other residents.

Interestingly, survey respondents said population growth is more of an issue than too much tourism, with 34% of survey respondents saying it is moderately to extremely problematic for their community. They



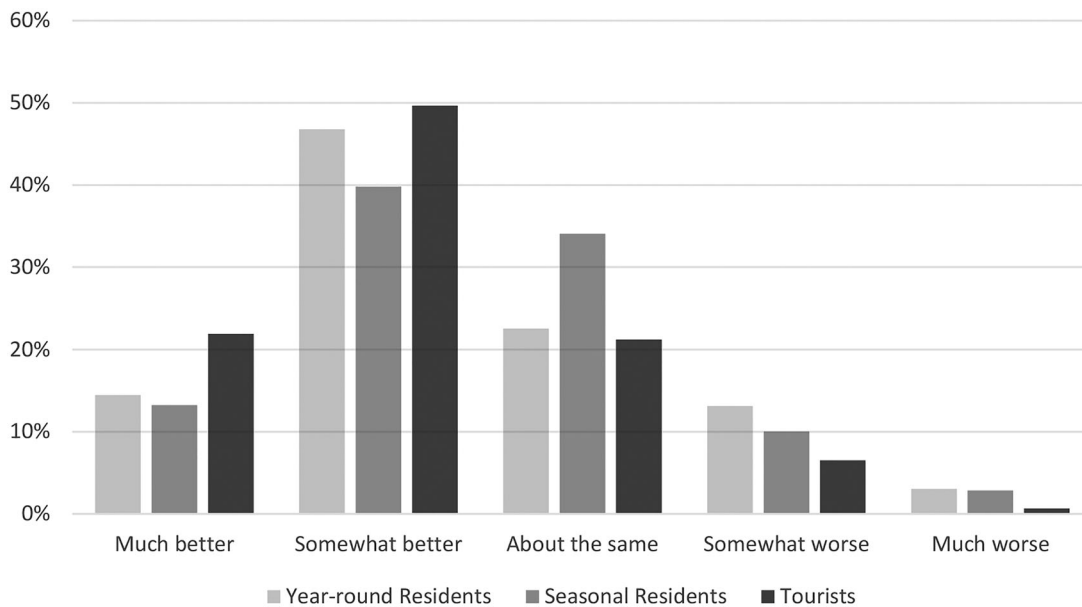


Figure 4. Changes in quality of life for residents and in quality of tourists' experiences.

similarly said that tensions between long-time residents and recent residents in their communities are more problematic than tensions between residents and tourists, with 30.7% saying this is a moderate to extreme issue. This suggests that the influx of amenity migrants appears as much a threat to community character and livability as increasing tourism. Interviewees spoke to this, with about half saying things such as

The issue in many of these communities is that everyone wants a piece of it. They want to live here. So the question becomes: How do you balance their desire to use the resource you live in and protect it? There are many disagreements about how our resource gets handed out.

Survey respondents were also asked about changes in quality of life for residents and quality of experience for tourists over the last 10 years. Most survey respondents said quality of life has improved for both year-round residents and seasonal residents, and more than 70% said they think the tourist experience has improved. However, about 10% to 15% of respondents said that quality of life has decreased for year-round and seasonal residents, and close to 10% said that the visitor experience has declined for tourists (Figure 4).

### **Growth Rates Correspond With the Severity of Some Challenges, but Not Others**

Observation suggests that once tourism and growth reach a certain point, they can negatively affect the local quality of life and visitor experience. To explore

whether this bears out in our data, we cross-tabulated growth and tourism against problems identified by communities.

We did so by dividing communities represented in our survey sample into quartiles reflecting their level of population growth rate between 2010 and 2016. As Figure 5 shows, respondents from the communities that had high growth tended to say traffic/congestion, changes in community character, environmental degradation, and population growth were more problematic than did respondents from slower growing communities. Issues such as climate-related risks, housing affordability, parking, and too much tourism appear to be unrelated to population growth rate. Not surprising, lack of resources was identified as most important in communities with negative growth or very little growth. These findings were also reflected in interviews.

We used a similar approach to explore whether there is a relationship between self-reported tourism increases and identified challenges. Surprisingly, there were no strong relationships between reported tourism growth and identified community challenges. This aligns with the finding that 63.7% of respondents who reported that tourism has increased substantially in their community in the last 10 years reported that too much tourism was either not at all or only slightly problematic. We also did not find any notable relationships between the population size of a gateway community and reported challenges.

Our takeaways from this analysis are that a) gateway communities of all shapes and sizes, not only those that are known amenity migration or tourism hotspots, are experiencing planning and development pressures

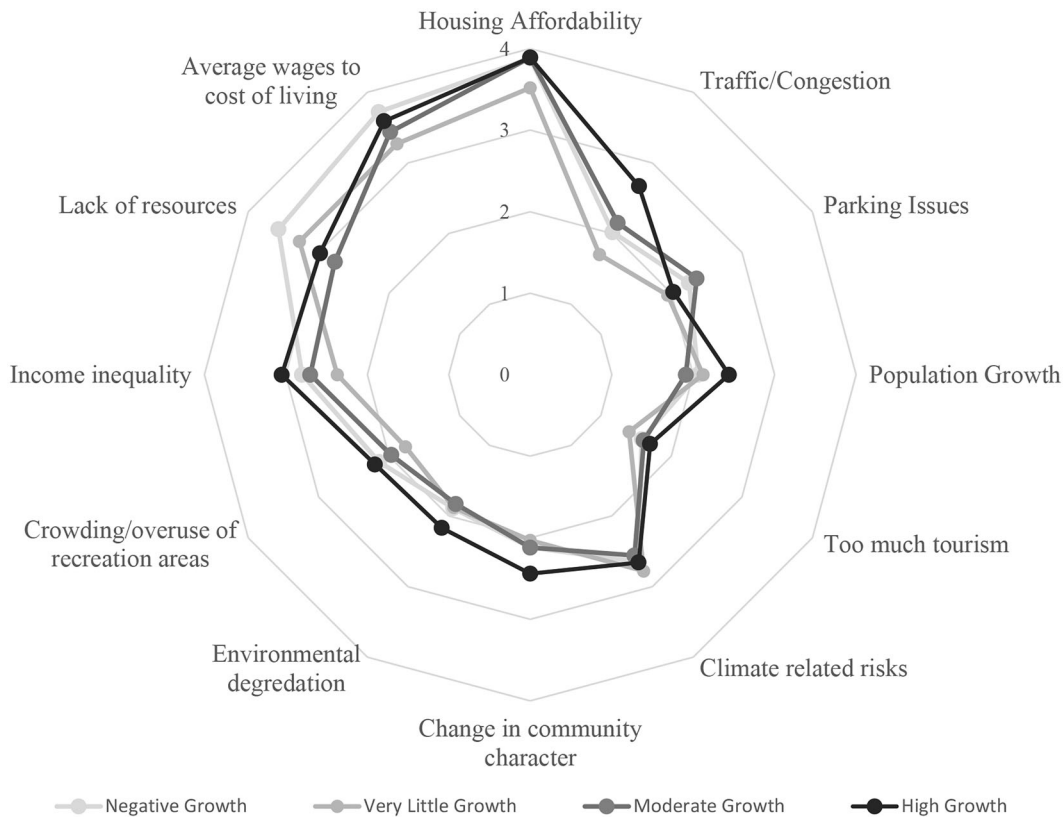


Figure 5. Gateway community population growth rates and average reported challenges (0 = not at all problematic, 5 = extremely problematic).

that merit attention; b) certain issues appear to be exacerbated in areas of higher growth; and c) population growth may be as much a challenge for gateway communities as increasing tourism. This reinforces the importance of paying attention to all gateway communities, not just those that are already destinations, and the need to plan for and consider the impacts of amenity migration as well as visitation.

**A Need for Proactive Planning, Additional Capacity, and Planning Support**

Interviewees, particularly those from areas with developed tourism economies and/or high growth rates, commonly emphasized the importance of proactive planning and preparing for growth and visitation. Capturing the sentiments of many people we talked to, one interviewee said,

We’re in this big growth period, but we didn’t have design guidelines in place. . . . From a municipal standpoint, we need to get ahead of the curve so we can prepare for what’s coming, but we need the time and staff and resources in order to do that.

Most of our interviewees expressed a sense of being overwhelmed, behind the curve, and/or in need of

additional capacity and resources to help them and their town prepare for and respond to the challenges they face. In their words, “We don’t have the planning capacity,” “All the small towns [in our region] have part-time mayors, many lack planners. . . . [Our community] could use a full-time manager, planner, etc.,” and “Two of the three cities in the county now have at least one professional planner on staff . . . but they still do not have the capacity to meet community planning goals or adequately review larger more complex development applications.” One interviewee said not having enough personnel to deal with planning and development challenges “keeps me up at night.” These concerns align with the above-discussed results from our survey, in which 40% of respondents said lack of resources or revenue is very or extremely problematic and another 30% said it is moderately problematic (Figure 3).

Not surprising, interviewees also expressed a concern about their ability to respond to major shocks. As one town manager from a developed gateway community said, “We don’t have the staff capacity to deal with major crises.” Such observations, sadly, seem to be all the more relevant amid the current COVID-19 pandemic, which hit many gateway communities, particularly those around ski areas, particularly hard and

threatens to devastate many gateway communities' economies. As a community and economic development director from a developed gateway community told us recently, "Local governments, especially those already constrained by a lack of revenue and staff capacity ... are truly buried right now. No one has time for *anything* except the most urgent and most impactful actions." This capacity issue is particularly concerning in light of the fact that rural development experts we work with anticipate that COVID-19 will lead to a massive wave of urban flight and related amenity migration to western gateway regions. As one planner from a gateway community recently said, gateway communities need to "get ready for an onslaught of remote workers."

Survey respondents provided some insight into what might help gateway communities respond to planning and development challenges. When asked whether an online toolkit or online forum to support planning in gateway communities would be helpful or very helpful, 56% of respondents said it would be helpful or very helpful, and another 19% said it would be moderately helpful. In response to an open-ended question about what tools and resources would be helpful for their communities, respondents commonly said best practices and model ordinances that are specific for gateway communities, case studies from other gateway communities, and general planning support (such as assistance with charrettes and visioning). More research will help clarify what planning support and resources would be most effective for western gateway communities, but these things are at least a good start.

Related to the need for planning and planning support, interviewees commonly spoke about the importance of planning at a regional scale when noting the relationship between housing affordability and spillover effects on other communities. These are regional issues that extend beyond the jurisdiction of a single town, and regional planning is likely required. When asked whether jurisdictions in their region collaborate around various issues, respondents indicated there is regional collaboration around transportation (21%), housing (13%), economic development (20%), tourism (19%), infrastructure (19%), and environmental and natural resource management (14%). The questionnaire respondents indicated that the most effective regional collaborations were related to tourism (mean 3.83, or very effective), infrastructure (mean 3.72, or very effective), and transportation (mean 3.7, or very effective). The regional collaborations that were reported to be the least effective were those related to housing (mean 3.01, or moderately effective). This is not surprising in light of the fact that housing appears to be a particularly pernicious and persistent problem for many gateway communities.

Further challenges to effective planning were revealed in several interviews. Specifically, seven interviewees indicated that local resistance to planning and related political tensions made it difficult to proactively plan for and respond to growth and development pressures, especially when working at a regional scale. As one interviewee said in a representative quote,

The way that the city is trying to be forward-thinking in planning isn't really welcome. [The county] residents and commissioners are significantly more conservative than city residents, not just in a partisan political sense but in their attitude toward any change at all.

Our observation suggests that both the need for regional planning and these kinds of political tensions are common in western gateway regions.

Comments from interviewees and our observation of gateway communities also indicate that gateway communities seem caught between a rock and a hard place, feeling they either need to get on the growth and development train that seems to lead to many of the issues we discuss here or risk drying up. This is evident in our survey results, in which respondents indicated their community does not want to become Moab (UT), Aspen (CO), "a big city," or "a tourist trap," but they also do not want to become "an abandoned small town." We suspect proactive planning and planning support are equally important for places that are at risk of "busting" as it is for those that are at risk of "booming."

### **A Call for Greater Attention to and Proactive Planning in Western Gateway Communities**

Our study illuminates the planning and development challenges gateway communities throughout the West are experiencing and the generalizability of those concerns. Our findings provide evidence that, as we suspected, many western gateway communities are experiencing growth in population and visitation as a result of their surrounding natural amenities and related quality of life and opportunities. As we hypothesized based on prior research and observation, growth seems to be driving a range of planning and development challenges for many communities. Notably, most issues—such as acute issues with housing affordability, cost of living relative to wages, and traffic and parking concerns—are things we tend to think of as "big-city problems," which stand out in stark contrast to the fact that these communities tend to identify with their small-town character. Surprisingly, increasing tourism

seems to be less of a driver of these issues than population growth.

Along similar lines, our results also suggest that western gateway communities are undertaking a range of strategies to address the challenges they face, many of which—such as e-bike share programs, community land trusts, and tiny house ordinances—are things we might expect more in urban areas than in small rural communities. We also heard many stories of “pop-up” planning interventions and planning experiments during our interviews. In light of these findings, we hypothesize that developed gateway communities—as small towns with big-city problems—might offer valuable laboratories for novel planning approaches and planning innovation. We feel this is worthy of further exploration.

As we expected when undertaking this study, our findings generate more questions than they answer. Each planning and development issue we identify here merits much greater and in-depth exploration. More research is also needed to explore the extent to which gateway communities are distinct from other rural western communities. Although we suspect the findings of this study have relevance for gateway communities nationally, that is also an area for further exploration. In addition, much more research is needed to examine potential solutions and strategies that can help these places preserve the qualities that make them such desirable places to live and visit.

In terms of planning practice, our findings drive home how important it is that gateway communities throughout the West—whether they are at risk of “booming” or “busting”—engage in forward-looking and proactive planning. Moreover, in light of the fact that these communities tend to be small with limited professional staff and capacity and are particularly vulnerable to outside shocks (such as the COVID-19 outbreak and its related impacts on tourism and amenity migration), there is a significant need and opportunity for professional planners and planning organizations to provide planning support and tools to assist these places in doing proactive planning. Our experience suggests that scenario-planning tools could be particularly valuable for gateway communities, helping them to envision different development patterns and transportation interventions as well as plan for shocks such as climate change and pandemics. Our results also suggest that planning around gateway communities needs to focus on a regional scale.

Our final takeaway from this study is that western gateway communities deserve and need far greater attention from planning practice and scholarship. Those of us who have spent time in these communities can speak to how unique these towns and cities tend to be.

Let’s help them preserve the qualities that make them so special.

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#### SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental data for this article can be found on the publisher’s website.

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