

# Bridging the Divide: How the EXPLORE Act and the GNAR Initiative Are Strengthening Gateway Communities

Jordan Smith

01/30/2025



# Bridging the Divide: How the EXPLORE Act and the GNAR Initiative Are Strengthening Gateway Communities

By: Dr. Jordan Smith, Director, [USU Institute for Outdoor Recreation & Tourism](#)

## All the Challenges...None of the Resources

Across the western United States, small towns nestled near national parks and public lands are facing an unexpected dilemma. Once known for their scenic beauty and small-town charm, these gateway communities—places like Moab, Jackson, and Sun Valley—are now struggling with challenges that resemble those of large urban centers.

Rapid population growth, surging tourism, and an influx of remote workers seeking a better quality of life have strained housing, infrastructure, and public services. While living on nature's doorstep brings economic benefits, it also drives up housing costs, creates congestion,

and fuels tensions between long-time residents and newcomers.

Despite their small size, these communities must navigate complex planning and development issues with limited resources. Local governments and planners are working tirelessly to balance economic growth, preserve community character, and ensure affordability—but they can't do it alone

## The Biggest Challenges for Gateway and Natural Amenity Regions (GNARs) in 2025

Housing affordability is one of the most pressing issues in gateway communities. As demand soars, local workers—especially those in the service and tourism industries—struggle to find stable, affordable housing. The proliferation of short-term rentals and second-home purchases only exacerbates the crisis, leaving fewer options for full-time residents.

Outdated land-use policies further compound the issue. Many gateway towns rely on zoning regulations designed for slow-growing rural areas, restricting the development of multi-family housing or accessory dwelling units. At the same time, environmental concerns limit expansion into surrounding public lands, making new development difficult.

These housing and land-use challenges directly affect transportation. Many gateway communities lack reliable public transit, forcing workers to commute from distant, more affordable areas. Seasonal tourism spikes also overwhelm roads and parking, creating traffic congestion in areas never designed for high visitation. Addressing these interconnected issues requires regional coordination, smarter planning, and policies that promote sustainable growth.

## The Power of Collaboration: Public Land Agencies and Gateway Communities

Solving these challenges requires more than just local planning—it demands a collaborative approach with federal land management agencies. Gateway communities are deeply connected to national parks, forests, and other protected lands, yet their voices are often absent from federal decision-making.

Federal land managers play a key role in shaping tourism and recreation experiences, which in turn impact local economies, infrastructure, and resident quality of life. Research shows that when communities feel included in land-use decisions, they are more likely to support tourism

and conservation efforts. Conversely, when they feel ignored—especially in decisions about recreation access, infrastructure, and conservation—tensions rise, fueling opposition to tourism.

A more coordinated approach between land agencies and local governments is essential. Collaborative governance—where residents, planners, businesses, and public land managers work together—can lead to smarter, more balanced decision-making. By aligning public lands management with housing and infrastructure planning, communities can find sustainable solutions that preserve their natural assets while enhancing local economies.

### **The EXPLORE Act: A Legislative Win for Gateway Communities**

The [Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences \(EXPLORE\) Act](#), passed in late 2024, represents a major step forward in supporting gateway communities. The bipartisan legislation strengthens collaboration between public land managers and local governments, ensuring more informed decision-making on tourism, housing, and infrastructure.

A key provision of the EXPLORE Act establishes the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, a body dedicated to coordinating recreation policies across federal lands. This ensures agencies like the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management work together to monitor visitation patterns, improve infrastructure, and mitigate tourism-related pressures on small communities.

Additionally, the Act mandates improved recreation visitation data collection, equipping local planners with real-time insights to manage visitor flow and mitigate overcrowding. Most significantly, it provides technical and financial assistance for housing, infrastructure, and tourism initiatives—resources that many gateway communities have long needed. With this framework in place, these towns now have the support necessary for long-term, sustainable planning.

### **The GNAR Initiative: Leading the Way in Gateway Community Resilience**

With the passage of the EXPLORE Act, now is the time for leadership and coordination—and the Gateway and Natural Amenity Region (GNAR) Initiative at Utah State University is ready to step up. As a research-driven program, GNAR specializes in helping small, resource-dependent communities navigate the complexities of growth, tourism, and land management through collaboration and data-driven solutions.

The Initiative is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between gateway communities and public land agencies.

Through its established network of planners, researchers, and local leaders, GNAR provides expertise in land-use planning, economic resilience, and policy development. By leveraging the resources provided by the EXPLORE Act, GNAR can help communities secure funding, implement sustainable tourism strategies, and plan for future growth. Most importantly, GNAR fosters the relationships necessary to ensure that tourism benefits—not overwhelms—gateway communities. Whether it's promoting innovative housing solutions, developing smart recreation policies, or strengthening public-private partnerships, GNAR is at the forefront of building stronger, more resilient communities across the West.

With federal support growing and organizations like GNAR leading the way, gateway communities finally have the tools they need to thrive. The future of these towns depends on collaboration, innovation, and smart planning—and now, for the first time, the pieces are coming together.

#### **Further Reading:**

Perren, C., Boley, B. B., White, E. M., Green, G. T., & Woosnam, K. M. (n.d.).

[Protected area influence over resident attitudes towards tourism in gateway communities](#). *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 0(0), 1–21.

Stoker, P., Rumore, D., Romaniello, L., & Levine, Z. (2021). [Planning and development challenges in Western gateway communities](#). *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 87(1), 21–33.



**Jordan W. Smith, Ph.D.**, serves as Director of the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University, where

he oversees initiatives that bolster Utah's economy by helping communities and agencies navigate the complex tradeoffs involved in outdoor recreation and tourism development. Under his leadership, the [Utah Outdoor Recreation Strategic Plan](#) and the <https://extension.usu.edu/gnar/> have equipped underserved communities throughout the Intermountain West with critical tools for sustainable economic growth.

An interdisciplinary scholar, Dr. Smith integrates econometric modeling, geospatial analytics, and social-ecological frameworks to address pressing natural resource challenges. His research examines how environmental changes and shifting population dynamics affect common-pool resources, including outdoor recreation opportunities and naturally dark skies—elements that are fundamental to Utah's quality of life and economic vitality. Through groundbreaking studies on monitoring and managing outdoor recreation across the West, his work underscores the importance of balancing environmental stewardship with economic growth.

A champion of collaboration and innovation, Dr. Smith has spearheaded projects such as the [Basecamp Conference and Workshop](#), uniting stakeholders to develop creative solutions for outdoor recreation management. Through these efforts, he exemplifies Utah State University's commitment to fostering innovation, cultivating talent, and strengthening the state's position as a national leader in sustainable development and economic competitiveness.