

# Gateway Community Assistance at Utah State

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## As The Pandemic Increases Pressures Felt By Gateway Communities, USU's IORT Looking To Help



The gateway town of Dillon, Colorado.

Across the country, cities and towns are struggling to survive during the COVID-19 outbreak. It has been particularly stressful for gateway communities-- towns or cities that border publicly owned lands such as national parks. An initiative through USU's Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism is looking at ways to help those communities.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 quarantine many of Utah's gateway communities were visited by people wanting to escape the cities.

"And what we're hearing from these community leaders is that they're really concerned, that they knew that that in-migration from urban areas was happening. But the current pandemic might have accelerated by 10-15 years as people just look for any, any way that they can get out of places that have that but been the hardest hit. And this has huge implications not just for the local economies but local healthcare systems," said Jordan Smith, the director of USU's Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism or IORT.

One example is Grand County where Moab is a popular spring destination. Here, visitors from outside the county were limited from entering because of inadequate health resources. Smith said serious health issues there require airlifting to Grand Junction or even farther.

"The pandemic has really brought into focus that the outdoor recreation economy, the tourism economy is not the sole direction that a lot of these communities should focus all their efforts into developing," he said.

Smith said most gateway communities across the western US have transitioned from economies dominated by fossil fuel and mining to tourism and outdoor recreation industries.

The coronavirus pandemic, he said, has shown many communities that both foster "boom and bust" economic cycles. He added that now, in-migration from visitors has significantly impacted real estate for some communities, pricing out some local residents.

Enter the Gateway and Natural Amenity Resource Initiative, GNAR. To help community leaders address these concerns, IORT hosts the Gateway Initiative, a system for sharing of resources and ideas. Bi-weekly webinars and discussions are led by a core group of university faculty, non-profits and federal agencies.

"What we're really focused on is trying to get those local communities just talking to one another about what they're implementing, the things that they're concerned about, and the things that they might be able to change as far as local planning goes in the months, years ahead," said Smith.

Sponsorship, like that from The North Face company creates funding opportunities for network members. Typically, North Face's Explorer Fund supports extreme athletes in global expeditions and events. Smith said that this year the company reached out to university programs and nonprofits addressing COVID-19 related issues.

"So we were able to secure some funding from them for the GNAR initiative," said Smith. "They're really interested in trying to return these gateway communities to what they were as that home base for expert exploration."

Smith said the unforeseen benefits to community members, such as these grant funds, make it especially rewarding for the Gateway communities to feel empowered.

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