

Local Perspective on Economic Development

Columbia Community

Characteristics of the Community

The Columbia community, founded in 1850 as a boomtown during the California Gold Rush, is characterized by its rich history, and unique atmosphere with its beginnings in the gold extraction industry between 1850-1860. In 1853, it was one of California's largest cities and stands as one of the few historic areas of the Gold Rush period to survive. Prior to Columbia's founding, the area was under Mexican authority as the State of Alta and for thousands of years prior to that home to the native Me-Wuk people.

It maintains the charm with a preserved Old West town and is proud to be a "living park" featuring concessionaire businesses serving both tourists and locals. The small businesses in Columbia offer a friendly and personal level of service, contributing to the community's welcoming feel.

Columbia Historic State Park (established in 1945) serves as a central anchor, reinforcing the town's identity, preserving buildings, managing concessionaire operations, supporting events, and offering interpretive programming. The local Columbia Chamber of Commerce puts significant time and effort into providing a wide variety of events in town.

The park is a place where docent volunteers and concessionaires dress in period attire and continues to be a popular destination for tourists, including school children on field trips. Fostering good memories for locals and those visiting from out of town, with tens of thousands of children visiting annually. It remains a safe family-friendly attraction that boasts a vibrant cultural scene with theater, street music, historical exhibits, and a museum.

Outside of main street and the State Park exist several small suburbs, mobile home parks, private business such as Blue Mountain Mineral (a producer of dolomite and limestone), a county airport, the CALFIRE Air Attack Base, Columbia Elementary School, a historic cemetery and schoolhouse, nearby access to Highway 49, and Columbia College, the local Sierra Nevada region's only institute of higher education.

Needs and Challenges of the Community

Columbia faces several challenges hindering its economic progress and development. The town's population is characterized by resistance to growth due to stringent design protections and past civic opposition, coupled with an insufficient local population to support economic vitality. The reliance on seasonal tourism creates a feast-famine cycle, especially with the loss of local services for basic needs.

Some expressed worry that growth would conflict with preservation of Columbia's heritage. However, it was pointed out that economic development does not necessarily mean expansion, but can focus on improving and revitalizing existing assets.

Infrastructure issues include frequent power outages that disrupt businesses, lack of connected and shaded pathways for pedestrians and cyclists, deferred road maintenance, incomplete public utility extensions, limited broadband access, and insufficient public restrooms for tourists.

Housing scarcity limits the available workforce and customer base, while the loss of traditional small businesses and aging population exacerbate the issue. Inadequate commercial properties, costly building regulations, further constrain new business development. A lack of local lodging options discourages tourists from extending their stay in the area. Economic constraints limit business-to-business support, and there is reduced interest among youth in starting businesses in the park due to a slow and complex approval process, leaving several buildings vacant or repurposed for state park staff.

Vision for the Future

The vision for the future of this community is one that embraces healthy growth and change while preserving its character look and feel.

Envisioned is the development of an environment inside and outside of the State Park, which is welcoming to both locals and visitors. An area which has a unified look, signage, pathways, and parking will not only draw more visitors but also motivate them to stay longer and support the local economy.

Within the Park, an expedited approval processes and increased marketing of the area in digital, events, and physical signage, would assist concessionaires. More regular events (including the off season) that draw visitors, and more lodging which provides for longer stays and hours of operation would result in longer stays.

Outside the park, additional commercial, industrial, and housing for local residents, workers, and businesses that fits the community's character This would lead to working-age Columbia residents finding places to live in the area and having local employment opportunities.

Ongoing Projects

Several positive developments and ongoing activities are already taking place in the Columbia community.

- Columbia College offers significant educational opportunities including recent efforts in establishing the Forestry Corps program, investing in fire service training, applying for housing grants, and partnerships with technology companies, and existing strengths in music, food, and childcare.
- Establishing a professionally staffed hybrid fire station with CALFIRE.

- The development of the Gold Rush Trail through the Tuolumne County Transportation Council (TCTC) which will connect Jamestown, Sonora, and Columbia with multi-modal pedestrian lanes.
- Continual efforts to expand Broadband for Main Street, as well as Yankee Hill area.
- The State Park has invested in hookup capabilities to allow businesses to connect generators, enhancing resilience during power outages.
- A “Clean California” grant has recently installed a welcome sign along Highway 49 marking the entrance to the area.
- A proposed lodging/glamping/housing mini resort is in the planning process for off Sawmill Flat near the Columbia College entrance.
- The creation of a five-mile trail route near the school and Columbia Airport between the community and CalFire.
- Numerous events, including the Los Posades, the “Glorious 4th of July” Celebration, the Big Band Street Dance, Easter, and as the birthplace of Cinco de Mayo, and recently the Little House on the Prairie event, along with many other activities in the park.

Action Items to Bring Progress

1. Support Additional Lodging

As a tourism driven area, Columbia needs additional lodging. This takes varied forms. Firstly, supporting a joint operation concession for existing historic lodging and the expedited approval by State Parks with County Support. Secondly, retaining existing lodging such as RV Parks and Inns by connecting them with business support resources. Thirdly, soliciting new lodging developments near Columbia which includes technical support. And last, encourages short-term rentals and the development of campsites.

2. Infrastructure Improvements Are Necessary

Improvements are necessary to encourage visitors and locals to stay as well as see needed development in commercial and housing. This includes building adequate parking facilities, creating shaded and well-lit sidewalks and trails connected to Sonora, identifying growth areas near Columbia for development, and assisting development with financing and approvals. Exploring a reliable backup power supply will ensure the town can continue to function during power outages.

3. Fostering a Sense of Arrival and Place is Essential

A powerful sense of place is achieved by developing a distinctive look and feel. This will help serve to balance growth with Columbia’s historic identity. Improving structures and enforcing guidelines along the Columbia Core and historic corridor viewshed will help maintain community consistency and increase economic vitality.

4. Increasing Physical Signage and Marketing

Additionally, highway signage on major corridors in Calaveras and Tuolumne County should clearly identify Columbia and match the more historic standard brown signs used for historic districts (as opposed to Caltrans green). The State Park's mission could be revised to serve not just as a tourist attraction but as a functional part of the community, such as revitalizing the butcher shop as a working business. A "Sierra Nevada Made" campaign, a regional brand, could also be launched to promote local products and commerce.

Additional Marketing could be done for other attractions like horseback riding, gold panning tours, Old West black powder shootouts, drag racing at the Columbia Airport, and private recreational pilot attractions.

5. Growing Partnerships is Vital for Sustainable Development

Building cooperative relationships with other government agencies and improving communication between state and county officials will help identify issues and develop effective solutions. This is of particular importance between the State Historic Park, Chamber of Commerce and concessionaires, and the County of Tuolumne where there is a shared desire to reduce barriers and encourage more business concessionaire development appropriate for the Park. A dedicated group should be formed to address legislative matters and discuss potential projects and programs that could benefit the community. These collaborative efforts will drive progress and ensure the successful realization of Columbia's vision.