

Local Perspective on Economic Development

Groveland/Big Oak Flat Community

Characteristics and Values of the Community

The location of Groveland/Big Oak Flat area is a rural community, adjacent to or within the forest, yet close to some conveniences. For many, the community reaches from the top of the two grades, past Buck Meadows, all the way up to the entrance to Yosemite on Highway 120.

It stands out as one of the 2% of communities in the country that house a national park within its borders, providing a “sense of arrival” to this popular destination. The region enjoys a rich history, including the development of Big Oak Flat due to gold mining and Groveland's growth linked to Hetch Hetchy and the establishment of Yosemite National Park.

The area is recognized for having a small-town charm with a great sense of community. It's argued that it is not over or under-developed, lending to its quaintness. The population is primarily a retirement community and considered a safe environment with a different feeling from the Bay Area. Historically, there has been robust volunteerism in the community, however, this declined greatly during the pandemic, and now is gradually returning.

An entrepreneurial spirit exists with a distinctive absence of chain businesses, the majority of businesses being privately owned. Notably, it achieved the highest number of female entrepreneurs in 2019. Tourism is a significant part of the economy, with various outdoor recreation activities and a substantial transient use of residential properties, often geared towards visiting the nearby national park. Most who visit arrive by car, and some arrive at the local airport. Many visitors become future neighbors. It's believed those from abroad form their opinions about the US based on their impressions here.

However, for the Groveland/Big Oak Flat area, there are challenges, including a 55% poverty level. It has an aging population and a declining youth demographic. There is a perceived separation between the Pine Mountain Lake (PML) community and the towns of Groveland and Big Oak Flat. In addition, there is a divergence of opinions on growth, with a strong desire to preserve the peace and quiet that attracted many residents to the area. A universal concern exists about fire risk and emergency preparedness.

Vision for the Future

The community's vision for the future of Groveland/Big Oak Flat includes developing the area to be a more enticing tourist destination, moving away from it being a pass-through location. Achieving this necessitates both infrastructure enhancements and the expansion of the business community and community relationships.

The overarching goal is to foster a cultural shift towards becoming an "outdoor" community that prioritizes preservation while promoting community engagement, leveraging existing recreational destinations, and highlighting the region's rich history tied to gold mining and the railroad.

An emphasis must be placed on developing a diversity of businesses, fostering a more permanent resident base to support local businesses. There's a keen interest in improving the availability of family-friendly dining options, managing overcrowding during peak summer months, and boosting business prospects in the winter season. One venture may be establishing a camping and RV facility near downtown.

There is a call for upgrades to infrastructure such as sidewalks, increased parking availability, and possible implementation of a shuttle service from the Community Resilience Center (CRC) to downtown. A more reliable electrical grid and the installation of generators at key locations like schools and the airport to ensure safety are critical. There is a recognized need for more affordable housing options to accommodate workers. However, all this requires a commitment to maintaining a billboard-free environment, and a focus on maintaining a small-town feel.

There is a strong desire for the County to listen to the community's input regarding development, as decisions are largely influenced by the County Board of Supervisors and the Groveland Community Service District (GCSO). Maintaining a small-scale, common-sense approach is emphasized, with a focus on preserving the community's intrinsic value. There's also a call for County policies to be updated to reflect current needs, and for improved education and communication between the County, residents, and visitors.

Needs of the Community

The Community needs encompass a wide range of areas, including affordable housing, affordable fire insurance, emergency and long-term medical care, affordable childcare and youth activities, acknowledging the challenges of staffing and sustainability. Also beneficial would be improved coordination between community groups, and a stronger presence by social services to address issues of poverty, drug use, and mental health. Currently they staff the CRC one day a week.

In terms of promoting business, improved signage, technology for visitor information (potentially through an app), winter attractions, and the establishment of a local recreation department. The community also seeks more businesses that actively engage with and integrate into the community, a more active Chamber of Commerce, more diverse events, and historical education opportunities.

Ongoing Projects

There are a number of ongoing infrastructure efforts within the community, such as initiatives by the Groveland Community Service District (GCSD) focusing on fuel reduction, recreation, and improvements in public facilities. These efforts include projects funded by "Clean California," grants from CalTrans for new restrooms, bus stops, picnic areas, and expanding our trail system, such as the Hetch Hetchy Railroad Trail. In addition, there is movement to develop an RV Park. GCSD and Chamber are looking into options to improve electrical reliability. The Chamber has requested Yonder Yosemite owner consider cleaning up "the Scar" property ahead of the development schedule. And Southside Community Connections and Tuolumne County Transportation Council (TCTC) are working to provide more transportation to the area by expanding services into the valley.

Recreation businesses are flourishing. There is a focus on accommodating visitors to Yosemite, especially those without reservations. Groveland Trail Heads is working to expand mountain biking trails which is beneficial for tourism. GCSD often holds "Movies in the Park." And the Tioga Baseball team, established since 2016, has also contributed to the community's vibrancy.

Emergency services are actively working on securing funding for expansion, while water projects that increase fire-flow for Big Oak Flat are in progress. CalTrans has also agreed to sidewalk projects for improvements of the downtown area. And PML has already started on their evacuation planning which can be expanded out into the community.

Action Items to Bring Progress

1. Create a More Inviting Destination for Visitors

Comprehensive planning and active engagement with visitors are essential components to increase our customer base. This initiative involves enhancing visitor experiences through improved signage, sidewalks, restrooms, and increased parking facilities while being cautious not to exacerbate overcrowding issues. Additionally, leveraging historical education opportunities can enrich the visitor's understanding of the area. This may also involve the establishment of a local recreation department and the integration of technology, such as a dedicated app, for streamlined visitor information.

2. Improve the Business Culture

A proactive dedicated approach is needed to bring potential investors here. This should also involve establishing objectives and metrics to evaluate if progress is being made. In a bid to diversify the local business landscape, the community may introduce an array of offerings. This includes expanding family-friendly dining options, increasing the variety of lodging facilities, such as the addition of an RV park, and enhancing the appeal of the destination during the winter season by introducing more reasons to visit and stay. Regular bus trips from the other parts of the county, such as Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System (YARTS) to the area will assist in bring people to the area.

3. Fostering Community Engagement

Fostering community engagement is a vital aspect of this endeavor. Establishing a dedicated community hub will serve as a catalyst for collaboration among local organizations and improve communication within this network. Key to this effort is identifying a representative who will play a pivotal role in ensuring that the community's voice is not only heard but also effectively addressed. Collaborative support from both the community and county government is crucial to shape future of this inviting tourist destination.