Economic Development Scan for the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation

BIA Route 6

Produced by

HUMMINGBIRD COLLECTIVE

International Institute of Tourism Studies
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Cover photos courtesy of Water Environmental Technologies and Ibrahim Osta, George Washington University University.

Executive Summary

Photo courtesy of Alix Collins

The Economic Development Strategy for the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation—BIA Route 6, outlines a bold, community-driven vision to transform the Tribe's most vital corridor—Upper Box Elder Road (BIA Route 6)—into its economic and cultural spine. Originally a road reconstruction project, BIA Route 6 has evolved into a platform for community-centered development that advances Tribal sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and local prosperity.

Developed ON Route 6
Projects positioned directly along the corridor (e.g., grocery, fuel, cafés).

LINKED TO Route 6
One parcel back (e.g., housing, solar microgrids, workshops).

ENABLED BY Route 6
Interior lands made viable by corridor investment (e.g., tourism, ag operations).

An economic opportunity scan was conducted, co-led by the Chippewa Cree Tribe, the Hummingbird Collective and George Washington University's International Institute of Tourism Studies, that aligns a proposed $28M infrastructure investment with land readiness, business development, and workforce growth. The resultant strategy also reflects deep community engagement through interviews, meetings, and technical focus groups.

This economic scan takes a broader view by design—recognizing that sustaining business activity along Route 6 depends not only on the corridor itself, but on development opportunities that serve and strengthen the wider community.

A "Corridor-First" framework guides investments ON Route 6, including a Visitor Gateway, Community Commons, Tribal Transit, Entrepreneurship and Innovation, and Energy Sustainability; LINKED TO Route 6, including a Food Sovereignty node; and ENABLED BY Route 6, including Outdoor Recreation and Lodging amenities. Development is clustered around these strategic nodes to balance Tribal culture with economic gain.

To unlock development and investor interest, foundational actions are recommended that include zoning, soil testing, THPO coordination, utility assessment, and cultural protocols through a comprehensive planning process that will unify governance with economic and infrastructure goals.

Implementation blends Tribal entrepreneurship, external capital, and workforce pipelines. Microenterprise support tools like pitch events and e-commerce hubs are proposed for small business owners. A complementary external investment strategy outlines tools like a Route 6 Development Fund, Heritage Share Program, and joint ventures. Workforce efforts focus on local talent pipelines through a Route 6 Skills Academy, paid apprenticeships, and partnerships with Stone Child College and the Chippewa Cree Health Center.

> ***"Route 6 is the foundation that connects our homeland to its economic future. By strengthening this corridor, we're opening the door for new businesses, safer communities, and opportunities that will keep our people thriving for generations to come."***
>
> **Harlan Baker** — Tribal Chairman

1 Introduction

Photo courtesy of Alix Collins

Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Route 6—also known as Upper Box Elder Road—will be a key transportation infrastructure investment on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation (RBIR). The reconstruction of Route 6 has been in the planning stages for several years, initiated to address longstanding safety, connectivity, and access issues across a 10-mile segment of road stretching east from Box Elder through the heart of the Reservation. Over the years, Chippewa Cree Tribe (the Tribe) of the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation tribal planners and community members have raised concerns about poor road conditions, limited pedestrian safety, and insufficient infrastructure to support new housing or commercial development.

The project continues to gain momentum as design and engineering phases are being completed, with reconstruction improvements now proposed for the first 7.3 miles. Route 6 serves as the Reservation's primary east-west connector, linking households, schools, tribal offices, clinics, and future development sites. According to Tribal estimates, approximately 2,077 vehicles traveled this road daily in 2024, with that number projected to increase to 3,148 by 2045, underscoring its central role in daily life and commerce.

The Tribe partnered with IMEG and the Hummingbird Collective, in collaboration with the George Washington University International Institute of Tourism Studies (GW) (referred hereafter collectively as the team), to go beyond the reconstruction planned for Route 6, and pursue an integrated, community-driven economic-opportunity scan of the entire 10-mile Upper Box Elder Road corridor, and align with the Tribe's broader goals including land readiness, cultural tourism, workforce development, and long-term business enterprise planning.

Photo courtesy of Ibrahim Osta

In doing so, the team worked closely with the Tribe in identifying the ventures, infrastructure and capacities that can transform it into RBIR's "Main Street" while acknowledging and advancing Tribal sovereignty, cultural vitality, and household prosperity. This scan supports the Tribe's broader Route 6 Development Framework, which aims to create a market-driven, culturally grounded corridor that clusters everyday services, incubates enterprises, and welcomes visitors, enabling the Tribe to align its proposed $28 million in roadway reconstruction toward the Tribe's long-term economic gains.

1.1 Objectives

This economic development scan is designed to complement the BIA Route 6 infrastructure investment by identifying viable land uses, business development opportunities, and workforce strategies along the corridor. The primary objectives are to:

- Identify development nodes with high potential for business clustering, mixed-use projects, or cultural initiatives;
- Evaluate land readiness, including utility access, zoning and jurisdictional considerations;
- Align development concepts with community priorities, such as food sovereignty, cultural revitalization, and youth engagement; and
- Create a framework for sustained economic self-reliance, guided by cultural values and supported by existing infrastructure investments and increased governance infrastructure.

Building on existing transportation planning efforts, the economic scan aims to ensure that physical improvements translate into long-term, community-driven economic outcomes.

1.2 Community-Driven Approach

Our overarching approach integrates rigorous analysis, community-led visioning, and successful models from comparable communities. Central to this approach is our Corridor-First Lens, organized around the "On, Linked, Enabled" framework (see Section 4 for more details). This methodology categorizes opportunities as projects developed directly on Route 6, linked to the corridor, or enabled by its redevelopment, aligning recommendations with the Tribe's significant capital investment to maximize utility access, visibility, and ecological stewardship.

Deep stakeholder engagement was fundamental, conducted between May and June 2025 through extensive key-informant interviews, open community sessions, and targeted technical focus groups. Specifically, the team:

- Conducted 18 one-on-one interviews with Tribal department staff (planning, housing, transit, environmental, health, natural resources, energy, police), entrepreneurs, educators, and service providers to understand governance structures, infrastructure constraints, and community aspirations.
- Facilitated two community meetings attended by approximately 54 residents, including elders, youth, and community advocates, focusing on cultural identity, development priorities, housing needs, and tourism initiatives.
- Organized two technical focus groups with 16 participants from Tribal administration, technical partners, and local businesses, providing detailed insights into governance, land-use, and policy challenges.

This stakeholder engagement process not only informed our analysis but is helping to foster community ownership, ensuring a Route 6 corridor economic development strategy remains grounded in local experiences and priorities.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

2 Current Situation Analysis

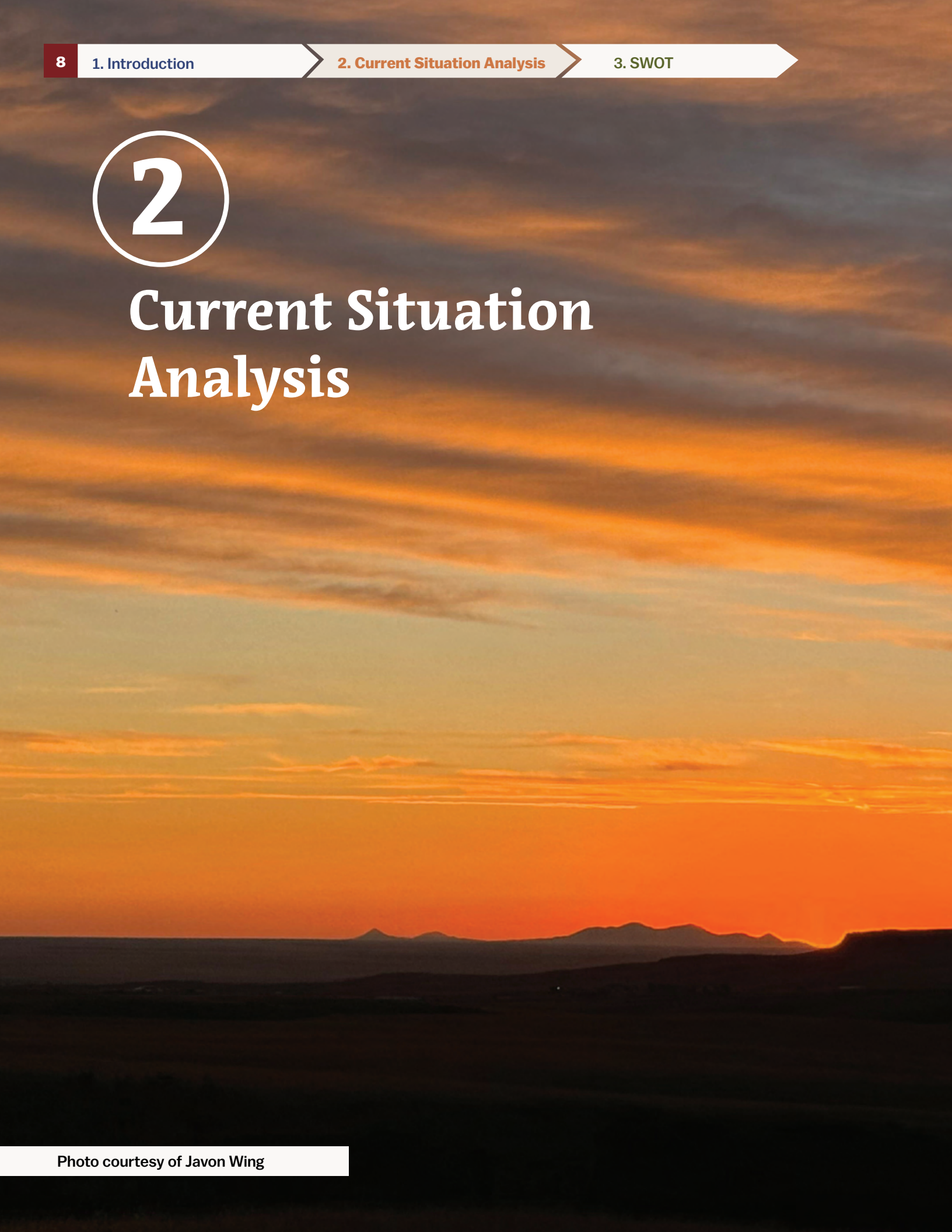


Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

2.1 About the Chippewa Cree Tribe

The Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation (RBIR), located in north-central Montana, is home to the Chippewa Cree Tribe. The Tribe was officially recognized in 1916 through an act of Congress, which established the Reservation as a homeland for Chippewa (Ojibwe) and Cree peoples who had long been displaced across the northern Plains. The Reservation is named after Chief Asiniiwin (Stone Child or Rocky Boy) who championed efforts for federal recognition and a permanent homeland. Over time, the Reservation became a unifying place for both Chippewa and Cree communities, shaping a shared cultural identity that continues to thrive today.[1]

RBIR encompasses approximately 130,000 acres across Hill and Chouteau Counties in north-central Montana. Nestled in the foothills of the Bear Paw Mountains, the Reservation features a diverse landscape of mountainous terrain, rolling foothills, mixed-grass prairie, and wooded areas. This land supports important wildlife habitats and traditional gathering areas, and continues to serve as a vital cultural and ecological foundation for the Chippewa Cree people.[2]

According to the Tribe's Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation (RBIR) includes 18 named communities or village settlements, many of which consist of small housing clusters with 40 or fewer homes. Some of the notable communities include Rocky Boy Agency, Azure, Parker School, and Middle Dry Forks. Eight of these villages are designated as census-defined places (CDPs), and most are located within or near the Bear Paw Mountains, reinforcing the Reservation's geographic isolation.[3]

The Reservation's land is held in federal trust to support the sovereignty and collective well-being of the Chippewa Cree Tribe, and development efforts must be approached with care and respect for both environmental and cultural values—especially in areas of traditional significance or sacred sites such as Baldy Butte, which is protected and not open to tourism.

2.1.1 Population and Growth Trends

Between 2017 and 2025, RBIR experienced several demographic and economic shifts.

The total number of enrolled tribal members increased by 7.03%, from 6,800 to 7,278. However, the number of enrolled members residing on the reservation declined slightly by 1.33%, falling from 4,138 to 4,083.

Notably, the overall on-reservation population increased significantly by 31.78%, from 3,794 to an estimated 5,000 people. While some inconsistencies appear in population figures presented in the Tribe's latest CEDS, the data reflect substantial growth on the Reservation and highlight the importance of maintaining accurate, up-to-date demographic information to inform planning.

Table 2-1: Changes in Tribal Membership and On-Reservation Population, 2017–2023

Indicator	2017	2025	Change
Enrolled Tribal Members	6,800	7,278	7.03%
On-Reservation Tribal Members	4,138*	4,083	- 1.33%
On-Reservation Population (Total)	3,794*	5,000	31.78%
Median Age	-	28.2	-

Sources: For the 2017 data - Chippewa Cree Tribe Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). For the 2025 data - Chippewa Cree Tribe Enrollment Office. NOTE: The 2017 CEDS presents inconsistent figures on this point, stating both that 4,138 enrolled members lived on the reservation and that the total reservation population was 3,794.

1 Chippewa Cree Tribe. (2024). Tourism Feasibility Study.
2 Chippewa Cree Tribe. Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, 2019-2024 (CEDS)
3 Ibid.

2.1.2 Age Distribution and Household Characteristics

The Reservation has a notably young population, with a median age of 28.2, compared to Montana's median of 38.7. Approximately 39% of residents are under 19, and those under 9 account for 19% of the population. With an average household size of 3.7—well above the Montana average of 2.5—the community reflects strong family ties and multigenerational living patterns, while also signaling potential concerns around overcrowding.[4]

2.1.3 Education and Language

Education levels among Tribal residents reflect a resilient and dedicated student community that continues to face systemic barriers to educational access. As of 2023, approximately 14.5% of adults hold a bachelor's degree or higher, while nearly 16% have not completed high school.[5]

According to community members, language remains a vital cultural anchor: while English is used in daily life, the Reservation has ongoing programs for Ojibwe and Cree language revitalization, including immersion classes led by elders and educators.

Table 2-2: Economic Indicators for the Chippewa Cree Tribe, 2017–2023

Indicator	2017	2023	Change
Median Household Income	$44,138	$42,548	- 3.60%
Per Capita Income	$17,710	$16,893	4.61%
Labor Force Participation	45%		
Poverty Rate	27.8%	35%	25.9%
Official Unemployment	13%	13.5%	-8%

Source: For the 2017 data - Chippewa Cree Tribe Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). For the 2023 data: ACS Census Reporter (median household income, per capita income, poverty rate), Internal Meeting Notes (official unemployment, 2025).

2.1.4 Labor Force Participation

Economically, the picture is mixed. Median household income declined by 3.6%, from $44,138 in 2017 to $42,548 in 2023, while per capita income showed a modest 4.6% increase over the same period. Labor force participation dropped slightly from 45% to 43.5%, and the poverty rate increased significantly—up 25.9%, from 27.8% in 2017 to 35% in 2023. These trends suggest that while some households may have experienced stable or modest income gains, a growing portion of the community is facing economic hardship.

The official unemployment rate on the Reservation remains high, around 13%, as reported in both the 2019 CEDS and confirmed in more recent Tribal meeting documentation. However, Tribal leaders and economic development staff emphasize that these figures do not fully capture the extent of underemployment or workforce exclusion. When accounting for seasonal, informal, and discouraged workers, they estimate the true unemployment rate ranges from 40–50% annually and can rise to as high as 70% during winter months, when outdoor and seasonal work becomes scarce.

Taken together, these data points highlight both modest demographic growth alongside persistent economic challenges, especially related to income distribution, employment access, and poverty. They underscore the need for economic development strategies that are grounded in local data and responsive to lived experiences of Tribal members.

4 U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). Census Reporter profile: Rocky Boy's Reservation and Off-Reservation Trust Land (American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates profile). Census Reporter. https://censusreporter.org/profiles/25000US3205-rocky-boys-reservation-and-off-reservation-trust-land/

5 Ibid.

2.1.5 Employment by Sector

Based on the data from the U.S. Census Bureau, the most common employment sectors for the civilian population (ages 16 and over) on RBIR and Off-Reservation Trust Land are educational services, and health care and social assistance (28.3%) and public administration (23.2%).

Other notable sectors include arts, entertainment, recreation, accommodation and food services (12.6%), followed by professional, scientific, management, and administrative and waste management services (9.9%). Additional employment is found in retail trade (8.0%) and finance, insurance, real estate, and rental and leasing (7.5%). Smaller portions of the workforce are employed in construction, agriculture, and transportation-related industries. This distribution illustrates a workforce rooted in education, health, and public service, with additional participation in hospitality, professional services, and small-scale trade and industry.

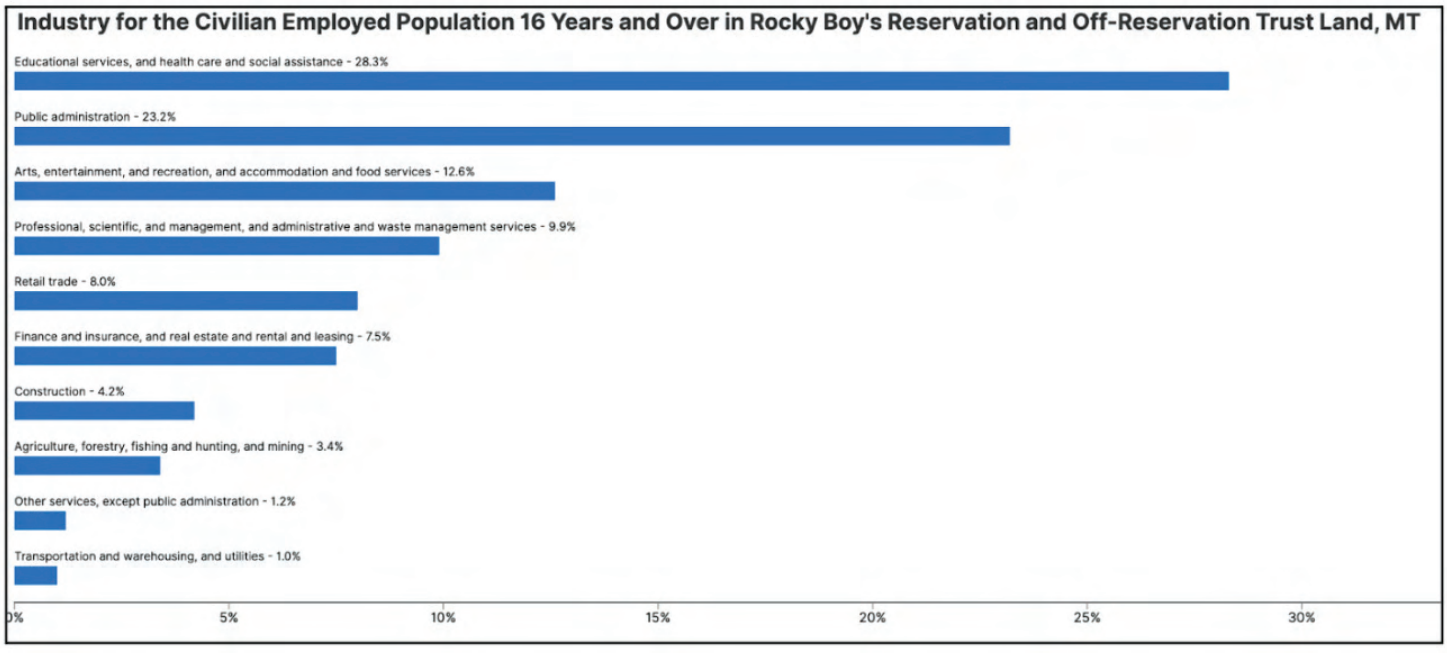
2.2 Enabling Environment

An enabling environment for economic development refers to the foundational conditions—such as stable governance, clear legal frameworks, access to infrastructure, and a skilled workforce—that foster confidence for investment, innovation, and the growth of Tribal enterprises. For Tribal Nations, cultivating an enabling environment is closely tied to the exercise of sovereignty, the ability to attract aligned investment, and the advancement of locally driven economic priorities. By strengthening policy frameworks, streamlining land and business approval processes in accordance with Tribal priorities, and investing in capacity-building, the Tribe can support a transparent, opportunity-rich environment in which Tribal citizens and external partners can collaborate and succeed.

2.2.1 Governance

The Chippewa Cree Tribe of the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation is governed by a constitutionally established Business Committee, which functions as both the executive and legislative branch of the tribal government. The Committee is composed of eight elected members and a Tribal Chairman, all of whom serve four-year staggered

Figure 2-1: Industry for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over in Rocky Boy's Reservation and Off Reservation Trust Land, MT



Source: U.S. Census

terms and are elected at-large by enrolled tribal members. This election format requires candidates to win a majority vote Reservation-wide, which has historically led to underrepresentation of certain subgroups within the Tribe.[6]

In the early 1990s, the Tribe consolidated Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Indian Health Service (IHS) programs under Title IV of the Public Law 93-638 Self-Governance Compact, greatly increasing the Tribe's authority over its administrative functions and service delivery. As a result, nearly all core government functions are now administered directly by the Tribe. Today, there is only one BIA employee stationed at Rocky Boy; all other BIA services are compacted and tribally managed.[7]

It is important for Tribal governments to assert their sovereignty while also addressing key factors that serve as foundational for attracting outside investors and investments. These are the same considerations that investors typically assess when evaluating opportunities, as they help determine risk, potential returns, and overall investment viability. These factors include:

- Economic Stability
- Political Stability and Governance
- Legal and Regulatory Framework
- Market Size and Access
- Infrastructure
- Labor Force and Human Capital
- Market Openness and Trade Agreements
- Taxation System
- Financial Market Development
- Social and Environmental Considerations
- Risk Mitigation
- Cultural and Social Factors

Demonstrating strength across these areas—through tools such as laws, land use plans, zoning, building codes, intergovernmental agreements, financial and investment policy, and workforce development—can help signal a stable, predictable environment that is conducive to long-term investment. It is important to note that intergovernmental agreements and relationships are often instrumental in negotiating and establishing a level of influence with jurisdictions that control or manage some of the key factors listed above.

Transportation right-of-way is often inclusive of the delivery of many other utilities including water, sewage, electricity, gas, and telecommunications. Highways 2 and 87 along with the railroad can have a major impact on the success of RBIR's economic development. The U.S. government, State of Montana, and Hill and Choteau county governments are important influences as are key hubs of Havre and Great Falls. Being able to show how the RBIR works with them, and the Tribes of Montana will help position the tribe for future investment.

2.2.2 Land Use, Construction, and Building Standards

Barriers to land use and construction remain some of the most entrenched obstacles to development on the Reservation. While there is growing demand for housing, commercial space, and public infrastructure, progress is constrained by regulatory, physical, and procedural challenges that limit the Tribe's ability to fully activate its development potential.

Land Availability, Zoning, and Topography

Limited access to developable land is consistently identified as a challenge to economic development efforts. BIA-controlled trust land, the absence of formal zoning designations, and lengthy and inconsistent lease approval processes can create uncertainty for tribal members, entrepreneurs, and outside investors alike. The Reservation currently has no designated shovel-ready commercial zones, including in key areas such as Route 6.

6 Chippewa Cree Tribe. Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, 2019-2024 (CEDS).
7 Internal Meeting Notes. 2025.

Without formal zoning or identified land for development, infrastructure planning becomes more difficult, and opportunities for economic growth may be delayed.

During community listening sessions, Tribal members emphasized the importance of streamlining the leasing process to support Tribal housing and business development. To support this, the Tribe is actively working to implement the Helping Expedite and Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership (HEARTH) Act, which would enable Tribal management of leasing authority and significantly reduce BIA involvement and processing times.

In parallel, the Tribe could develop a formal land use plan, zoning map, and set of development regulations aligned with BIA leasing regulations under 25 CFR Part 162. Once adopted, these tools could support the creation of a nonprofit Tribal corporation that would hold a masterlease, following required environmental reviews. Under this structure, the nonprofit Tribal corporation could sublease parcels to Tribal members and developers for housing, business, or other approved uses—enabling a more efficient, self-determined pathway for growth. The nonprofit corporation could be sustained through leasing fees and grants and help support infrastructure, public safety, business development, and investor outreach.

In addition to regulatory complexity, topographic and physical conditions present real planning considerations. The Reservation's landscape includes rolling hills, flood-prone areas, and remote pockets that may limit large-scale, contiguous development. These natural features require thoughtful planning and investment to ensure infrastructure is focused in areas where it is most feasible. Stakeholders have emphasized the value of land use mapping and cluster planning to guide decisions and maximize the impact of infrastructure investments.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

Tribal planners and environmental staff have also identified the need for comprehensive soil assessments to support safe, stable development. Several areas experience erosion, poor drainage, or unstable soils, which can limit housing placement or affect road conditions. Long-term development strategies should take these conditions into account to reduce risks and avoid costly retrofits.

Construction Practices and Site Challenges

Even when land is available, construction quality and site preparation remain serious concerns. According to community members and tribal administrators, many homes and public buildings have been constructed with minimal planning, inconsistent materials, and poor oversight, leading to frequent rework, ballooning costs, and long-term maintenance issues. Some projects—particularly those not tied to federal funding—fail to meet basic safety or quality standards, often falling short of HUD or other regulatory requirements.

RBIR's soil conditions further complicate building efforts. Expansive clay soils, especially along the Route 6 corridor, have contributed to cracked foundations and structural failures in key facilities, including the police station and tribal college. Improper site preparation and the absence of engineered foundations have amplified these failures and increased the risk of long-term deterioration.

Building Codes and Procurement Oversight

Underlying these construction issues is the lack of a formal building code system. While other tribes (e.g., Fort Peck) address this gap by including code compliance language in contracts, RBIR currently lacks any codified building standards unless required by outside funding sources. In practice, this means that contractors frequently proceed without formal design documents, often working from simple sketches or verbal plans.

According to tribal administrators we spoke with, an effort to adopt building codes based on International Code Council (ICC) standards—similar to Montana state regulations—was initially approved by tribal council but later rescinded. It was noted that some leaders raised concerns that codifying external standards might weaken tribal sovereignty. However, technical staff and planners argue that formalizing and enforcing tribally defined codes would actually strengthen sovereignty by asserting tribal control over safety, quality, and regulatory systems.

The contracting and procurement process also lacks structure. Contracts are often vague and omit critical clauses, such as inspection timelines and close-out procedures. Technical staff also commented that the tribal council often awards contracts directly, bypassing any standardized procurement office or legal review. While a preference for local contractors is well-intentioned, it sometimes leads to projects being awarded to firms without the technical experience or capacity needed for high-quality construction.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

2.2.3 Infrastructure and Transportation

Infrastructure is central to the long-term economic viability and quality of life of the RBIR. While major investments are underway—including broadband, road upgrades, and energy resilience—existing limitations in utilities, transit access, and regional connectivity continue to pose barriers to development.

2.2.3.1 Road Conditions and Regional Access

The core transportation route through the Reservation is BIA Route 6, a 10-mile corridor that is undergoing significant reconstruction. Planned improvements include safety enhancements, drainage upgrades, grading, and accommodations for adjacent commercial development. This corridor serves as a vital artery for residents and commerce, with an estimated daily volume of over 2,000 vehicles.

In addition to Route 6, the region is supported by two major state highways:

- U.S. Highway 87, a north–south route running along the western edge of the Reservation, connects Great Falls to Havre and intersects with U.S. Highway 2.
- U.S. Highway 2, an east–west corridor approximately 26 miles north of the Reservation, provides broader regional access across northern Montana.

In 2023, the Tribe completed its Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP), which outlines strategies to maintain a safe, reliable, and sustainable transportation system for the Reservation. As part of this planning process, field reviews were conducted to assess the current condition of roadways across the region.

These reviews revealed widespread pavement deficiencies, including potholes, rutting, cracking, and settlement. In several areas, severe deterioration poses risks to both safety and mobility. Roads such as Haystack Loop, Duck Creek Road, and Parker School Road show signs of landslide damage and significant surface failure. Additionally, many routes lack proper drainage, leading to erosion and weakening of the roadbed over time.

Access issues were cited as another major challenge. Flood-prone areas and landslides have periodically cut off access to homes and critical facilities. Roads like Lower Box Elder and Beaver Creek are especially vulnerable during high water events, leaving some residences completely inaccessible. In emergency situations, this poses serious risks for residents.

Key goals of the LRTP include increasing inter-modal connectivity, installing safety features along all routes, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of existing facilities through maintenance and reconstruction. The Council also seeks to stimulate economic growth by developing transportation projects that create both short- and long-term employment opportunities for Tribal members. All efforts are guided by a strong commitment to protecting cultural and natural resources and preserving the traditions and values of the Chippewa Cree people.[8]

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies

2.2.3.2 Air and Rail Access

Air and rail connections to the Reservation are limited but accessible:

- Havre City–County Airport, approximately 26 miles north, offers commercial flights via Cape Air to Billings, Montana.
- Great Falls International Airport, located about 100 miles south, is the nearest international airport. It is served by five carriers (Allegiant, Delta, Frontier, Alaska, United) with direct flights to nine major U.S. cities.
- Amtrak passenger rail service stops in Havre, connecting east-west across Montana via the Empire Builder line.

These facilities support travel and economic exchange but are not directly linked to RBIR by public transit or shuttle services, making personal vehicle ownership essential for most long-distance travel.

2.2.3.3 Broadband Availability and Digital Equity

In 2025, the Chippewa Cree Tribe completed a major milestone in its digital infrastructure strategy with the rollout of a tribally owned and operated broadband network. Managed by Buffalo Rock Communications in partnership with Ciena and Spy Ego Media, the system includes both fiber-optic and wireless components, enabling access across residential areas, schools, healthcare facilities, and business hubs.[9] This infrastructure represents a

8 Chippewa Cree Indians of the Rocky Boy's Reservation. (2023). Long-Range Transportation Plan.
9 Communications Today. (2024, February 21). Chippewa Cree Tribe launches broadband to bridge digital divide. https://www.communicationstoday.co.in/chippewa-cree-tribe-launches-broadband-to-bridge-digital-divide/

significant leap forward in digital sovereignty, allowing the Tribe to maintain local control over its data systems, connectivity, and future technological expansion.

The broadband expansion is already delivering measurable impacts in digital equity by:

- Enabling telehealth services and remote education for youth and adult learners;
- Supporting e-commerce and home-based business models;
- Providing new technical training pathways and remote employment opportunities;
- Laying the groundwork for future economic development along the Route 6 corridor.

The system was built with future scalability in mind. Large-capacity conduit infrastructure allows for additional fiber installation, and the network design includes fiber-to-home service where feasible and wireless delivery in mountainous or hard-to-reach areas. Buffalo Rock Communications also plans to install six cell towers, not only to improve coverage but to support eventual entry into broader telecommunications services. The initiative is already strengthening community resilience and expanding economic participation, particularly among youth and emerging entrepreneurs.

> ***"Route 6 is the lifeline of our reservation — it carries our people, our goods, and our future and is an investment in our sovereignty, our safety, our economy, and generations of Chippewa Cree yet to come."***
>
> **Neal Rosette Sr.**
> Planning Director

2.2.3.4 Utilities: Water, Sewer, and Energy Capacity

Despite the momentum in broadband, utility infrastructure remains one of the RBIR's most pressing development constraints. The community's aging water and wastewater systems frequently experience boil water advisories, pipeline freezing, and service disruptions. While a 54-mile water pipeline to Lake Elwell was proposed to address long-term water supply issues, funding has been inconsistent. At current funding levels, full completion will take many years, leaving large areas of the Reservation underprepared for residential or commercial growth.[10]

On the energy front, the Tribe is actively pursuing utility sovereignty through the potential formation of a Tribal Utility Authority (TUA). This initiative would allow the Tribe to manage energy generation, distribution, and utility infrastructure, reducing reliance on external providers like Hill County Electric. A Tribal Utility Feasibility Study is underway, supported by Department of Interior funding applications.

The Chippewa Cree Energy Corporation, a small but growing tribal enterprise with 3–4 employees, is leading this charge. Their long-term vision is to become a fully sovereign utility provider that can:

- Deliver broadband and fiber-optic services to all residents and institutions;
- Operate tribally owned energy infrastructure, including solar, natural gas, and potentially geothermal;
- Install cell towers to boost connectivity and telecom capacity;
- Provide power for new commercial ventures and potentially regional data centers.

10 Stimson, A. (2017, May 11). Untapped water: Rocky Boy's. Native News Project, University of Montana School of Journalism. https://nativenews.jour.umt.edu/2017/untapped-water-rocky-boys/

Plans for renewable energy are particularly ambitious. The Tribe aims to build a community-scale solar array over bison pastures using agrivoltaics, paired with solar tracking systems to maximize capture during long summer days. Integration with natural gas and eventual geothermal systems is also being explored as part of a diversified energy portfolio.

Furthermore, the Tribe owns 18 natural gas wells, yet much of the potential profit is lost to external gathering and transport fees. Although the Tribe also operates a propane company, non-tribal providers continue to serve a significant portion of the community, limiting local economic retention. On the residential side, many homes—some inherited from former military base transfers—suffer from poor insulation and outdated infrastructure. As a result, residents frequently report winter heating bills of $600 to $700 per month. While some weatherization kits and energy audits have been distributed, the scale of need far surpasses the resources currently available.

2.2.4 Business and Industry Landscape

The business landscape on RBIR is anchored by public-sector employers and tribal enterprises, with an emerging interest in small business development and entrepreneurship. While the tribal government remains the dominant economic force, there is growing recognition of the need to diversify into agriculture, creative industries, and renewable energy.

2.2.4.1 Entrepreneurship and Small Business

Private business activity on the Reservation remains sparse. Most are small, family-run operations such as gas stations, salons, and general stores. One of the most frequently cited barriers is the difficulty of accessing commercial land. Complex BIA leasing procedures and a lack of shovel-ready sites have made it challenging for private entrepreneurs to establish or expand businesses—particularly along high-potential corridors like Route 6.

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies

Additional barriers such as limited access to start-up capital and infrastructure constraints further inhibit private-sector growth. Addressing these issues through policy reform, improved land use planning, and investment in business support services will be critical for unlocking the full potential of both tribal and privately led economic development.

The entrepreneurial spirit is especially strong among younger Tribal members who are exploring ventures in fashion design, e-commerce, solar services, and food production. While many already own and operate businesses, these are often located off the reservation due to the complex and burdensome BIA leasing process. Entrepreneurs expressed a strong desire to bring their businesses home but face multiple barriers—including not only challenges with the leasing process, but also limited access to start-up capital and essential infrastructure.

One particularly urgent need is for improved shipping options. Community members emphasized the importance of having faster, more dependable services like UPS and FedEx available locally to support both incoming supplies and outgoing goods. There is support for creating a business incubator or co-op facility—ideally located

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies

along Route 6—that could serve as a hub for innovation, provide shared resources, and reduce reliance on outside service providers.

There is also a growing movement among younger Tribal members to reclaim traditional foodways, arts, and entrepreneurship. Elders and teachers such as John Murie are mentoring youth through moccasin-making and hidetanning, offering pathways for cultural entrepreneurship. However, to support this momentum, the community identified the need for foundational business training (finance, planning), local infrastructure (e.g., e-commerce capacity), and coalition-building to support networks of Native entrepreneurs.

To help meet these needs, Bear Paw Development Corporation's Small Business Development Center (SBDC) offers no-cost, confidential consulting and training for start-up and existing businesses. As part of a statewide network, their expert staff helps entrepreneurs strengthen financial, managerial, and technical skills essential for success in today's competitive environment—supporting long-term business growth and sustainability in the region.[11]

Tribal Businesses

The Tribe has established a foundation of tribally owned enterprises that provide critical employment opportunities and exemplify models of economic self-determination. Major entities include the Northern Winz Casino, which serves as both a revenue generator and regional entertainment venue; Buffalo Rock Communications, a tribally operated broadband provider advancing digital infrastructure and sovereignty; and the Chippewa Cree Construction Corporation.[12] Stone Child College functions not only as an educational institution but also as a workforce development driver, and the Tribal Ranch and Bison Program supports cultural preservation and food sovereignty through buffalo stewardship and harvesting.

The Tribe faces a critical economic leakage issue. Tribal estimates suggest that 90% of that payroll is spent off-reservation, particularly in Havre and Great Falls, where residents travel to shop, dine, and access services not available locally. When applying a local multiplier effect of 5×, this represents an estimated $135 million in lost annual economic activity.[13]

In recent years, the Tribe has taken deliberate steps to reduce economic leakage and improve local service access through expansion in grocery and retail infrastructure. The CNC Market was established as proof of concept for tribally operated grocery services. Building on its success, a new

11 Bear Paw Development Corporation. Small Business Development Center. https://www.bearpaw.org/services/small-business-development-center
12 Chippewa Cree Tribe. Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, 2019-2024 (CEDS).
13 Internal Meeting Notes. 2025.

mini-grocery store is under construction near Stone Child College and the tribal agency, designed to carry 2,000–3,000 essential items for students and nearby households. A convenience store is also planned in a growing residential zone between the police station and the college, near the Help Lodge and adjacent brown buildings, strategically aligned with upcoming housing developments. Additionally, the Tribe is in advanced negotiations to acquire the Jitters convenience store on U.S. Highway 87. This acquisition would expand regional market presence and improve price competitiveness for local consumers.[14]

These efforts are not only about service delivery—they are part of a broader strategy to recirculate tribal dollars, strengthen tribal control over key goods and services, and create opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship rooted in community needs.

The Tribe also owns a concrete plant and a mobile harvesting unit, both of which are underutilized but have significant potential. Tribal leaders have emphasized the importance of evaluating future concrete demand tied to capital projects to determine if the tribal plant can meet projected needs and retain construction-related spending locally. Similarly, while the mobile harvesting unit currently processes only a handful of buffalo each year, there is a goal to increase the herd and scale up capacity to 25–50 animals annually. This would enable greater support for local food distribution and advance food sovereignty objectives.

2.2.4.2 Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Energy

Agriculture remains both a cultural tradition and a growing economic opportunity on the RBIR. Current efforts include small-scale farming of culturally significant crops such as potatoes, squash, and grains, as well as interest in expanding bison harvesting and value-added food production. However, stakeholders emphasized that the current scale of bison harvests is economically unsustainable, and the Tribe would need to pursue USDA certification to access larger markets and stabilize operations. Increasing processing capacity—potentially to 25–50 animals annually—would support food sovereignty goals while generating local employment and marketable products.

In tandem with agriculture, the Tribe is actively pursuing pathways to long-term energy sovereignty. In 2025, RBIR participated in a federally funded solar workforce training program, where approximately 30 tribal members between the RBIR and the Oglala Sioux Pine Ridge Reservation completed hands-on training in solar installation. Several trainees have since secured full-time jobs in the solar energy sector. Tribal Chairman Harlan Baker described this program as a key step toward energy independence and local job creation.[15]

One of the most notable examples of small business innovation in this space is Sun Spirit Solar, a Native-owned company founded by a tribal member who was inspired during his studies in Arizona to align solar development with Indigenous values of sustainability and self-sufficiency. After stepping away from the tribal energy board, the founder launched Sun Spirit Solar to demonstrate the feasibility of renewable projects through direct action.

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies

14 Ibid.

15 Tribal Business News. (2024, March 15). Six tribes complete solar workforce training as funding remains frozen. https://tribalbusinessnews.com/sections/energy/15028-six-tribes-complete-solar-workforce-training-as-funding-remains-frozen

The business has since provided services to private homeowners and institutions like Stone Child College, though it has faced regulatory barriers—particularly the need for BIA approval to modify structures on trust land, such as installing solar arrays on community housing.

From an economic perspective, energy costs present a major opportunity for savings. As of 2018, the Tribe was reportedly spending an estimated $18 million annually on utilities. Stakeholders believe that renewable energy investments could cut this cost in half, while also keeping energy dollars within the community. Early efforts to pursue larger-scale renewable projects were met with internal hesitation, largely due to the legal complexities of navigating utility agreements and fear of potential conflict with existing providers.[16]

Community members envision a future in which the RBIR blends traditional ecological knowledge with modern infrastructure, including solar-integrated parking structures, lighted bike and walking paths, green roofs, and regenerative building design. This vision reflects a broader community interest in sustainability, energy sovereignty, and infrastructure that supports both environmental and economic resilience.

2.2.4.3 Tourism

Tourism is a priority development area for the Tribe, and is cited specifically in the Tribe's 2019–2024 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, which highlighted tourism as a means to "capitalize on our beautiful lands and history" and "keep dollars circulating through the community."[17]

This local emphasis on tourism aligns closely with broader trends across Montana, where the industry is a major economic driver, generating over $5 billion in visitor spending in 2024 and supporting more than 38,000 jobs statewide.

Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation sits within both Hill and Chouteau counties, and the tourism dynamics in each provide important context. In 2023, Hill County generated $42.2 million in visitor spending, driven largely by transportation (35.4%), food and beverage (34.0%), and lodging (18.7%). Top spending categories included gas and diesel, restaurants and bars, and hotels. Notably, there was no recorded spending on outfitter or guide services.[18]

In contrast, Chouteau County recorded a lower total of $16.6 million in visitor spending, but with a starkly different profile: nearly 65% of all expenditures—$10.8 million—were tied to outfitter and guide services. This suggests a strong emphasis on guided outdoor experiences and cultural or recreational tourism, distinguishing it sharply from the infrastructure-driven tourism economy in Hill County.[19]

These visitor spending trends align well with the existing assets and tourism development opportunities on RBIR, especially the potential for cultural and nature-based experiences.

16 Internal Meeting Notes. 2025.
17 Chippewa Cree Tribe. Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, 2019-2025 (CEDS).
18 Montana University System. (2023) Non-Resident Expenditures Dashboard: Hill County. Tableau Public. https://tableau.mus.edu/t/missoula/views/ExpendituresDashboard/C-RoughDraft
19 Montana University System. (2023) Non-Resident Expenditures Dashboard: Chouteau County. Tableau Public. https://tableau.mus.edu/t/missoula/views/ExpendituresDashboard/C-RoughDraft

Tourism Feasibility

The Tribe further demonstrated its commitment by commissioning a formal Tourism Feasibility Study in 2023 through funding from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Tribal Tourism Grant Program. This study was designed to assess the potential and sustainability of tourism development on the RBIR and identify viable opportunities for economic and cultural advancement.

Key findings from a survey conducted as part of the tourism feasibility study include strong support among tribal members for expanded tourism, with 94% of Chippewa Cree respondents in favor. Preferred tourism areas identified by tribal members include the mountains, culturally significant sites, the Agency area, Highway 87, Stone Child College, the Ski Bowl, and Pow Wow grounds. Survey respondents also emphasized that certain locations—such as sacred sites, sundance grounds, Baldy Butte, ceremony grounds, cemeteries, villages, and areas with culturally significant plants—should remain off-limits. Primary concerns raised involved the presence of strangers, safety issues, and potential environmental impacts.

Additional survey findings include that 57% of non-resident respondents expressed interest in visiting RBIR if more tourism opportunities were available. The most preferred types of tourism among visitors were museums (55%), hiking (52%), and camping (46%). In terms of services, restaurants (75%), lodging (68%), and gift shops (44%) were identified as most important. Additionally, 60% of respondents favored a mix of self-guided and guided tour experiences.

The Tourism Feasibility Study identified key barriers to tourism development, including Rocky Boy's remote location, limited infrastructure, seasonal constraints, a small skilled labor pool, and lack of public transportation. Additional challenges include marketing gaps, visitor safety concerns, and the need for cultural permissions from elders.

Key recommendations from the study include:

- Establishing a Tribal Tourism Office to oversee planning, coordination, and community engagement.[20]
- Starting small with modest investments: improved signage, guided hiking and fishing tours, tour vans, RV parks, and campground upgrades.
- Investing in tourism-related infrastructure such as lodging, food services, and transportation options.
- Collecting tourism data to support informed decisions and performance tracking.
- Forming regional partnerships (e.g., with Fort Belknap, Montana Indigenous Tourism Alliance, American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, or travel agencies).
- Marketing to travelers along US Highway 2, a major east-west route within reach of the Reservation.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

20 Since the Feasibility Study, this office was established. However, it has not been consistently staffed.

Key Tourism Attractions

Tourism on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation is still in the early stages of development, with limited infrastructure currently in place. However, there is clear potential for growth, grounded in the Reservation's cultural richness, scenic landscapes, and community-led events. Existing attractions offer a strong foundation for future planning and investment in tourism that reflects the values and identity of the Chippewa Cree Tribe.

RBIR's tourism attractions can be organized into four main categories or product pillars: Nature and Outdoor Recreation; Cultural and Historic Heritage; Leisure and Entertainment; and Events. Table 2-3 describes each category and identifies potential attractions.

Nature-Based Tourism Opportunities

The reservation offers a range of nature-based outdoor recreation opportunities, primarily centered around fishing, camping, and hunting. There are four main fishing reservoirs—Williamson, Browns, Bonneau, and East Fork—along with smaller sites like Rotary Park. Recreation permits are required for non-tribal members, costing $10 for a three-day pass, and are available both at the tribal office and in Havre. Camping is currently free for tribal members, though

Table 2-3: Attractions by Type within Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation

Categories	Number of Attractions	Description	Attractions
Culture & Historic Heritage	2	This category encompasses attractions and sites that embody the arts, culture, and historical significance of the destination, immersing visitors in the rich cultural heritage and history of the place. Examples include museums, architectural landmarks, historic structures, and religious sites.	Rocky Boy's Buffalo Herd; Burial Site of Rocky Boy
Nature & Outdoor Recreation	1	This category highlights the natural resources, featuring attractions like state parks, recreational areas, wildlife management areas, and scenic drives.	Bear Paw Mountains
Leisure and Entertainment	4	This category pertains to attractions and activities aimed at providing entertainment for visitors. It encompasses casinos and shows, and various other adventure and family activities.	Bear Paw Ski Bowl; Northern Winz Casino; Little Winz Casino; Chippewa Cree Tribe Community Skatepark
Events	4	This category includes attractions that are designed to facilitate visitor education and experiences, encompassing facilities such as visitor centers.	Rocky Boy's Annual Pow Wow; INFR Qualifier Rodeo; Indian Relay Races; Honor Our Legacy Indigenous Fashion Show

discussions are underway about introducing permits and a reservation system to manage use and prevent long-term occupancy.

The area supports hunting for elk, deer, antelope, mountain lion, small game such as grouse and coyote, and trapping for species like beaver, with different permit fees for tribal and non-tribal members. The hunting season typically spans from late August through early December.

Winter recreation is available at the Ski Bowl area, although its former lodge and restaurant were lost to fire and have not been replaced. There are currently no RV hookups or infrastructure for recreational vehicles.

Outdoor recreation management is supported by 35–40 seasonal employees and 21 full-time staff, including three Fish & Game wardens who handle daily patrols and enforcement.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

Aligning Tourism with Cultural Values

The Chippewa Cree Tribe's approach to tourism is inseparable from its deep cultural values and ongoing efforts to preserve language, spiritual traditions, and historical knowledge. Tourism development is being explored not as an industry in isolation, but as a potential pathway to support cultural revitalization, healing, and economic opportunity—if aligned with community-defined protocols.

The Tribe's Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) plays a central role in safeguarding cultural resources. As one of only two self-governance compact tribes in Montana, the Chippewa Cree THPO has full Section 106 authority, assuming all responsibilities from the BIA and extending oversight across 11 states that comprise the Tribe's recognized territory. This ensures that development—including tourism—respects sacred sites, such as the buffalo jump near Route 6, and complies with both Tribal and federal preservation law. Ground disturbance in culturally sensitive zones requires archaeological clearance and spiritual guidance.

Stakeholders emphasized that any tourism involving spiritual or cultural practices must be approached with humility, relational access, and readiness—not through transactional exchanges. Knowledge keepers stressed that offerings such as teachings, ceremonies, and sacred sites are governed by natural, spiritual, and human laws — not for casual consumption or unchecked commercialization. Protocols such as the ceremonial offering of tobacco remain vital, and tourism must be guided by Tribal-defined ethics.

2.2.5 Workforce and Skills Development

The workforce on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation is young, capable, and eager to contribute, but faces persistent barriers to accessing training, securing long-term employment, and pursuing career advancement. While existing programs offer foundational education and vocational opportunities, gaps in support systems and limited economic diversification continue to present challenges for workforce development and retention.

2.2.5.1 Workforce Challenges

During community listening sessions and interviews, Tribal members identified several ongoing challenges affecting workforce participation and development. These included skills gaps—particularly in business management, trades, and digital services—as well as limited access to childcare, which was noted as a barrier especially impacting working mothers. Transportation challenges were also raised, particularly for those without access to a personal vehicle.

Participants also shared that behavioral health and substance use concerns continue to affect some working-age adults, while many disconnected youth face barriers to job readiness and employment pathways. Together, these factors underscore the importance of holistic, community-centered workforce strategies that address both structural conditions and social support needs.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

2.2.5.2 Workforce Development Programs

Stone Child College plays a vital role in strengthening the local workforce by offering culturally relevant, community-driven education and training. The college provides academic and vocational programs tailored to meet local employment needs, including certificates and degrees in information systems, education, and public health. These programs are designed not only to support job readiness but also to empower students with skills that directly contribute to the economic development of the Chippewa Cree community.

In addition to its academic offerings, the college supports workforce development through partnerships with programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and vocational rehabilitation services, which provide adult education, career counseling, and wraparound support for individuals preparing to enter or re-enter the workforce. Stone Child College's commitment to accessible, quality education rooted in Cree culture makes it a cornerstone of long-term economic resilience for the reservation.

Youth engagement remains a top priority, with community members expressing strong interest in expanding mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities, introducing entrepreneurship exposure for high school students, and strengthening work-based learning partnerships with local employers. There is also a recognized need for greater support in youth wellness and behavioral health, which are closely tied to long-term workforce readiness. Existing programs at the Youth Wellness Center, Stone Child College, and the Box Elder School District provide promising foundations to develop more intentional and coordinated pathways to prepare young people for healthy lifestyles and future employment.

2.3 Community Quality of Life

The quality of life on the RBIR is deeply rooted in community, cultural identity, and a commitment to care for future generations. At the same time, longstanding infrastructure and service disparities continue to challenge residents' ability to access safe housing, transportation, healthcare, and wellness services. Collaborative, community-driven efforts to address these challenges are essential toimproving long-term health, economic participation, and social resilience.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

2.3.1. Community Well-Being and Safety

Community safety is a complex issue that goes beyond crime statistics and reflects broader concerns about infrastructure, enforcement, and social cohesion. While recent crime data specific to RBIR are unavailable, community members have expressed ongoing safety concerns through interviews and meetings. These included instances of vandalism, particularly targeting public infrastructure. One notable example involved newly installed bus stops that were damaged and have yet to be repaired or replaced, which has discouraged use of transit and eroded confidence in shared spaces.

Residents also highlighted several ongoing safety issues:

- Traffic hazards, especially along Route 6 and in school zones, where speeding and limited pedestrian infrastructure pose daily risks[21]
- Lack of driver licensing and insurance enforcement, which contributes to unsafe driving conditions and limited accountability on the roads
- Inconsistent enforcement of housing and building codes, resulting in unsafe or deteriorating living conditions in some areas
- Coordination gaps between housing, infrastructure, and public safety departments, which reduce the effectiveness and continuity of community improvement efforts

Despite these challenges, the community continues to show resilience and a commitment to proactive, culturally grounded, community-led solutions. Stakeholders emphasized the importance of expanding restorative justice approaches, youth leadership programs, and trauma-informed services. Programs aimed at boosting school retention, youth employment, and civic participation are gaining momentum. Many community members see these efforts as central to building a saferand more inclusive environment, not only by reducing harm but by promoting wellness, responsibility, and intergenerational healing.

21 Rocky Boy Health Center. (2025). Rocky Boy walk audit: Box Elder Road.

2.3.2 Housing Availability and Affordability

Housing is a major concern across RBIR. Community members consistently cited long waitlists for tribal housing, limited options for elders or young families, and a lack of new development to meet demand. Many existing homes are overcrowded, aging, or poorly insulated—conditions that exacerbate health and energy costs during winter months.

Barriers to housing development include limited availability of buildable parcels, lack of infrastructure (water, sewer, roads), limited land use planning capacity and zoning frameworks, and challenges navigating BIA leasing and approval processes. Several community members suggested the need for land banking strategies, master leasing arrangements, and expanded use of tribally managed housing authorities to facilitate development.

2.3.3 Transit Access and Mobility

Transit access remains a barrier on RBIR, especially for youth, elders, and low-income households. The Tribe operates a Tribal Transit system with two drivers and three on-demand vehicles and in 2024, the system provided approximately 13,000 rides. However, it does not operate on fixed routes or schedules and only operates during the day, making it difficult for residents to rely on for regular needs or needs that arise in the evenings or on weekends. Most residents continue to depend on private vehicles or informal ride arrangements, which restricts access to education, employment, healthcare, and community activities.

Community members expressed strong support for expanded and more reliable mobility options, including:

- A local shuttle service to connect residential areas with schools, clinics, and businesses
- Expanded regional transit connections to Havre, Great Falls, and surrounding communities
- Ride-share models or pooled-use systems, leveraging health department vans andmschool buses
- Safe and accessible pedestrian routes, particularly near schools, clinics, and along Route 6

Community input also underscored that the lack of reliable transit contributes to chronic school absenteeism, missed medical appointments, and missed work opportunities. Examples were shared of job interviews and shifts being missed simply due to the inability to find a ride.

2.3.4 Health Care Access and Social Services

The Rocky Boy Health Center remains the primary provider of health services on the Reservation, offering general medical, dental, behavioral health, and wellness programs. However, many specialty services must be referred to external providers in Havre or Great Falls, requiring long travel and creating delays in care access.

Community members identified the need for:

- Improved mental health support, particularly trauma-informed and culturally rooted counseling
- Expanded substance abuse treatment and recovery programs
- Supportive services for elders and people with disabilities
- Integration of traditional healing practices alongside clinical services

Challenges such as care coordination across agencies, ongoing workforce shortages, and limited access to specialty providers were cited as persistent barriers.

One of the most promising developments is the construction of a new Wellness Center on the Reservation. The facility will offer fitness space, mental health support, community programs, and youth engagement areas. It is intended to serve as a central hub for holistic health and well-being, grounded in the Cree and Chippewa concept of Nêhiyaw—balance of the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual.

Stakeholders see this facility as a game-changer for:

- Supporting preventative health and chronic disease management
- Providing a safe space for youth activities and mentorship
- Hosting culturally relevant programming such as language, nutrition, and traditional medicine
- Offering space for behavioral health integration in a non-clinical environment

The Center also represents a shift toward community-driven healing and resilience, rather than siloed or reactive health interventions.

2.3.5 Language Revitalization as Cultural Healing

Language preservation is a cornerstone of cultural resilience. The Montana Cree Culture and Language Revitalization (MCCLR) nonprofit was established in 2019 to combat the rapid loss of Cree and Chippewa languages. At the time, there were about 180–200 fluent Cree speakers and only one Chippewa speaker. After COVID-19, those numbers were halved, with only one known fluent Chippewa speaker remaining, an elder now in her late 80s.

MCCLR's immersive model treats language learning as full-time work. Adult learners engage five days a week for over a year, then teach youth through conversational methods. The program has shown transformative results—especially among participants who have experienced systemic barriers such as addiction—and is seen by many as one of the most effective healing practices in the community. Language reclamation here is directly tied to restoring mental, emotional, and spiritual balance (Nêhiyaw), reflecting holistic Cree worldviews.

The nonprofit has also begun investing in communications infrastructure to expand outreach through podcasts and independent broadcasting, helping to preserve and share language content with broader audiences, including youth.

Photo courtesy of Ibrahim Osta

2.4 Ecological Stewardship and Climate Resilience

The natural environment of the RBIR is deeply tied to community well-being, cultural identity, and long-term economic sustainability. Tribal members consistently emphasized that land use and development decisions must reflect traditional ecological knowledge and cultural values, alongside regulatory or economic considerations.

Protecting wildlife habitats, preserving natural ecosystems, and preparing for the impacts of climate change are not seen as separate efforts, but as interconnected responsibilities. As the community confronts increasing environmental pressures, there is broad support for approaches that blend cultural stewardship with forward-looking resilience strategies.

2.4.1 Wildlife and Environmental Stewardship

Wildlife plays a vital role in both the ecology and cultural fabric of the RBIR. The landscape includes a range of prairie ecosystems, riparian corridors, and forested foothills that support a variety of species including elk, deer, coyotes, raptors, upland birds, and native pollinators. The presence of buffalo herds, maintained by the Tribe, further reinforces the deep interconnection between ecological health and cultural identity, although they are just one of many species important to the area's biodiversity.

Community members emphasized the importance of protecting wildlife habitats as part of cultural and environmental stewardship, rather than seeing conservation as separate from land use planning. Concerns were raised about the encroachment of development into sensitive habitats, particularly along waterways and traditional hunting grounds.

There is broad support for integrating wildlife considerations into zoning, conservation easements, land management, and corridor planning to preserve natural migration paths and ecological balance. These efforts align with traditional ecological knowledge and Tribal teachings about living in harmony with the land. Maintaining intact ecosystems not only benefits wildlife populations but also supports food sovereignty, medicinal plant harvesting, and youth education about traditional lifeways.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

2.4.2 Climate Change and Community Resilience

Like many Indigenous communities in Montana, the RBIR faces intensifying climate pressures. These include higher temperatures, prolonged droughts, and more frequent extreme weather events. Tribal leaders and community members are increasingly focused on building resilience through local energy, water security, and sustainable land use.

Environmental Risks and Vulnerabilities

According to the CEDS, the most pressing climate-related risks on the RBIR include:

- Drought and low water tables, affecting agricultural output and water availability
- Flooding during spring melt, exacerbated by inadequate culverts and stormwater infrastructure
- Wildfire risk in dry seasons, particularly near forested or brush-covered areas
- Severe winter storms, which freeze utility lines and isolate remote homes

These hazards strain existing infrastructure and compound challenges related to housing, health, and food systems.

Climate Impacts on Economy and Housing

Many homes on the RBIR are older or poorly insulated, leaving families vulnerable to both extreme heat and cold. Climate stress has also reduced the viability of traditional grazing and agricultural practices, increasing reliance on external food sources. Seasonal instability undermines workforce retention and disrupts access to school, healthcare, and public services.

Tribal Strategies for Resilience and Adaptation

Tribal stakeholders are exploring several approaches to build resilience:

- Local renewable energy generation (solar and battery systems)
- Improved insulation and weatherization of housing stock
- Climate-sensitive infrastructure planning for roads and water systems
- Land use policies that preserve watersheds and limit high-risk development

The Tribe is also pursuing opportunities to align cultural values with environmental stewardship, including education on traditional fire management and sustainable resource use.

Stewardship and Conservation

Natural resource conservation efforts are rooted in traditional ecological knowledge. The Tribe emphasizes the preservation of prairie ecosystems, buffalo habitat, and native plant species. Environmental education, cultural site protection, and youth involvement are seen as key tools for sustaining long-term stewardship goals.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

3

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

3.1 Strengths

The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis presented in this section distills the main findings from the situation analysis, summarizing key insights about the current context.

Cultural Identity and Traditional Knowledge

The Chippewa Cree community holds deep ecological, cultural, and spiritual knowledge that informs stewardship of land, food, and language. This includes practices such as hide tanning, traditional food preparation, and ceremonial protocols that can guide how tourism and development are approached.

A deeply rooted value system grounded in sovereignty, land stewardship, and intergenerational knowledge underpins community priorities and resilience.

Language and Cultural Revitalization

Language immersion initiatives—such as the nonprofit MCCLR—treat language as both healing and transformational, especially for high-risk adults and youth. These programs restore identity, mental health, and cultural pride while building new generations of fluent Cree speakers.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem and Innovation

Community members are pursuing a wide range of place-based enterprises, from solar installation and construction to artisanal crafts and food production. Tribal entrepreneurs have successfully launched projects in grain milling, bison ranching, beadwork, and fashion.

There is strong support for cultural entrepreneurship as both a livelihood path and a form of cultural preservation, especially among youth and artisans.

Energy and Sustainability Leadership

Tribal members are advancing renewable energy goals through solar workforce training, home installations, and entrepreneurship (e.g., Sun Spirit Solar). These efforts support energy sovereignty, environmental values, and local job creation.

Visible sustainability projects (like community solar arrays) serve as tools for education, inspiration, and youth engagement.

Institutional Capacity and Momentum

Stone Child College, active grant-writing capacity, and community nonprofits provide an institutional base for education, cultural preservation, and program delivery in health, environment, and workforce development.

Community-led planning initiatives—across housing, tourism, energy, and land use—reflect a growing readiness to shape long-term development on local terms.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

3.1 Strengths

Community Readiness and Partnership Orientation

There is a strong appetite for multi-sector planning, especially in tourism, agriculture, energy, and housing. Stakeholders welcome partnerships that respect Tribal sovereignty and are aligned with cultural values.

Residents have returned, bringing their education and experience in areas of expertise contributing to community development, planning, innovation and mentorship, and many former residents remain culturally connected and interested, representing a "brain gain" for leadership, mentorship, and innovation.

Food Sovereignty and Agricultural Capacity

The Tribe has demonstrable experience in organic farming, small-scale milling, and livestock operations (including bison and cattle). These efforts position the community well for expanding local food systems, value-added production, and regenerative agriculture.

Food and land sovereignty are commonly linked in stakeholder feedback as essential for health, economic independence, and cultural survival.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

3.2 Weaknesses

Institutional Capacity

Limited Capacity for Investment Engagement
The Tribe has limited staffing and capacity to actively engage with investors or support complex financial planning.

Land and Infrastructure Limitations

Barriers to Land Use and Business Development
Complex BIA leasing processes, limited land use planning frameworks, zoning designations, and a limited supply of shovel-ready sites hinder commercial and residential growth.

Severe Housing Shortage
Chronic overcrowding, long waitlists, and underutilized vacant housing undermine population stability and limit workforce housing options.

Infrastructure Constraints
Aging water and wastewater systems, limited road capacity, and insufficient broadband and utility infrastructure pose serious constraints to expansion.

Gaps in Core Tourism Infrastructure
The Reservation currently has limited foundational amenities such as hotels, restaurants, RV parks, interpretive signage, and reliable transportation, making tourism development challenging.

Mobility and Geographic Barriers

Public Transportation Gaps
Public transit options are limited, and limited vehicle access can reduce mobility for elders, youth, and job seekers.

Remote Location
RBIR is far from major tourist corridors, with the nearest regional airport 50 miles away and limited Amtrak service. This reduces spontaneous tourism visits.

Capital, Data, and Planning Gaps

Limited Access to Capital
Trust land status complicates collateralization, making it difficult for tribal members to access financing even for viable business concepts.

Data Limitations for Planning
There are limited projections for future concrete needs, energy demand, and sustainability impacts. Persistent data limitations also affect planning across sectors, including tourism, energy, and economic development.

Entrepreneurship and Small Businesses

Difficulty Accessing Commercial Land
Complex BIA leasing procedures and a limited supply of shovel-ready sites have made it challenging for private entrepreneurs to establish or expand businesses—particularly along high-potential corridors like Route 6.

Limited Shipping Options
To support e-commerce business needs, entrepreneurs cited the need for more dependable services like UPS and FedEx available locally to support both incoming supplies and outgoing goods.

3.2 Weaknesses

Workforce and Retention Challenges

Workforce Retention Gaps
Although youth training programs exist, many participants leave for employment elsewhere. This ongoing "brain drain" impacts long-term workforce stability.

Limited Skilled Labor Pool for Tourism
Tourism-related businesses and jobs require hospitality, marketing, and operations skills that are currently scarce in the local labor force.

Agriculture-Specific Challenges

Economically Unsustainable Bison Harvesting
The current scale of bison is not yet at a scale to be profitable, requiring significant investment to expand and stabilize.

USDA Certification Barriers
Without certification, the Tribe has limited access to larger, more lucrative markets for meat and food products.

Limited Processing Capacity
Existing infrastructure cannot meet current modest goals (e.g., 25–50 animals/year), which limits tribal food sovereignty and economic development opportunities.

Natural Resource & Energy-Specific Challenges

Regulatory Barriers on Trust Land
Federal approval (e.g., from the Bureau of Indian Affairs) is required for infrastructure changes, which can delay projects like solar panel installation on community housing.

Legal and Institutional Complexity
Past large-scale energy initiatives were stalled due to the legal complexities of utility agreements and concerns about alignment with existing providers.

Limited Internal Capacity and Hesitancy
Despite interest, there is still hesitancy and limited experience with navigating the energy sector, especially for large-scale renewable projects.

Tourism-Specific Challenges

Seasonal Constraints
The tourist season is short (March–October), limiting profitability and year-round employment in the tourism sector.

Branding and Marketing Needs
A lack of destination branding, marketing outreach, and promotional infrastructure has prevented Rocky Boy's from becoming a known tourism stop.

Visitor Safety Perceptions
Some Tourism Feasibility Study survey respondents cited safety as a concern when considering visiting a reservation.

Cultural Permissions and Guardrails
The need for clear community protocols for sharing of culture and protocols for visitors has been noted. Elders and cultural knowledge holders emphasize community-led control over what cultural sites and stories can be shared. This creates necessary but complex boundaries around tourism development.

3.3 Opportunities

Integrated Planning and Infrastructure

Route 6 Corridor Plan
Co-developing a community-led comprehensive plan for Route 6 presents a strategic opportunity to integrate economic development, cultural preservation, housing expansion, and environmental sustainability.

Improved Construction Standards
Formalizing construction protocols—such as soil testing, engineered site plans, and contractor capacity building and training—can enhance project durability, lower long-term costs, and maximize public and grant funding.

Multi-Purpose Facilities
Investing in culturally-grounded community hubs that combine services like elder care, youth programming, health, and business incubation can increase efficiency, access, and cultural continuity.

Youth Empowerment and Workforce Development

Workforce Training Pipelines
Expanding vocational education in solar installation, construction, and cultural arts can empower youth, retain local talent, and build local contractor capacity.

Leadership and Mentorship
Creating school-to-career pathways and mentorship initiatives builds long-term leadership capacity and fosters future tribal governance and business leadership.

Reconnect with Young Professionals
Many former residents remain culturally connected to RBIR. Engaging enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the reservation can bring fresh innovation, remote expertise, and mentorship back into the community.

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies

3.3 Opportunities

Entrepreneurship and Small Business Growth

Business Support Hubs
Community demand is strong for dedicated spaces that support Tribal entrepreneurs, such as business incubators, cooperative markets, maker spaces, and shared-use kitchens—especially for food, art, and green industry ventures.

Local Partner Support
Bear Paw Development Corporation supports Tribal entrepreneurs through its Loan Department and Small Business Development Center. Clearwater Credit Union, Montana's largest CDFI and a cooperative credit union, is committed to working with Montana Indian tribes as part of a broader rural development strategy. They currently have a field of membership that includes the Blackfeet and Northern Cheyenne and Salish Kootenai reservation communities and are exploring the deployment of a mobile banking unit at RBIR to offer services such as loans, check cashing, and money orders and other services. Additionally, they are open to partnering with Stone Child College, the Housing Authority or any other organization that would like to partner to provide onsite financial literacy classes and they offer one-on-one financial counseling for community members.

Local Market Infrastructure
Establishing vendor stalls, drop-off logistics hubs, and small business centers would strengthen internal markets, keep more dollars circulating locally, and support emerging microenterprises.

Access to External Capital and Resources
Programs like SSBCI, USDA Rural Development, and Native American Development Corporation offer funding, infrastructure, and technical support, especially when backed by coordinated tribal planning and advocacy.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

22 Interview with Maria Vallandra, VP Community Partnerships, Clearwater Credit Union; enrolled member RBIR

3.3 Opportunities

Tourism and Cultural Economy

Authentic, Community-Led Tourism
There is strong interest in tourism experiences rooted in the Chippewa and Cree cultures—such as guided buffalo and nature tours, artisan and culinary events, traditional accommodations, and storytelling—developed with community-defined guardrails.

Cultural Preservation through Tourism
Tourism can support preservation of language, ceremony, and Traditional Indigenous Knowledge when protocols are respected, and knowledge holders lead content creation and interpretation.

Renewable Energy and Environmental Stewardship

Tribal Utility and Renewable Energy Initiatives
Expanding solar infrastructure—via solar fields, off-grid systems, and home installations—can lower utility costs, increase energy sovereignty, and model environmental stewardship.

Youth Engagement in Green Industries
Partnerships with organizations like Red Cloud Renewables and visible projects (e.g., community solar arrays) help spark youth interest in energy careers and build local technical capacity.

Food Sovereignty and Agriculture

Bison Processing and Local Food Systems
Scaling up bison production and harvesting, investing in organic farming, and supporting value-added food production can advance nutrition, create jobs, and sustain cultural practices tied to land and food.

Community-Based Agriculture
Farming initiatives aligned with cultural values can enhance economic independence and environmental resilience, especially when tied to markets and educational programming.

Data-Driven Development

Strengthen Planning through Data
Investing in robust data systems related to energy use, infrastructure, construction materials, and environmental impacts will enable better decision-making, attract investment, and ensure sustainable growth.

3.4 Threats

Climate and Environmental Risks

The Reservation faces increased exposure to climate-related hazards such as flooding, prolonged drought, and wildfires, particularly near waterways, forested zones, and the Bear Paw Mountains. These events threaten housing, infrastructure, and cultural sites, and can strain existing emergency response capacity.

Federal and State Policy Shifts

Shifts in political leadership and federal policy priorities—particularly around Tribal funding, energy development, and environmental regulation—introduce uncertainty to long-term planning. Inconsistent availability of grants and changing regulatory landscapes can delay or disrupt development projects.

Economic and Market Volatility

Fluctuations in construction costs, energy prices, and tourism trends may impact the feasibility of infrastructure investments and small business ventures, especially in remote and seasonal markets like north-central Montana.

Negative Public Perception and Misinformation

Harmful external stereotypes and uninformed media portrayals of reservations and Tribal communities can deter tourists, investors, and partners. Clear, community-defined visitor protocols and proactive education and outreach can address concerns and build trust.

Photo courtesy of Ibrahim Osta.

4 Strategic Framework

Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies.

4.1 Shared Vision

This vision reflects the voices and priorities of Chippewa Cree Tribal members who participated in interviews, focus groups, and community meetings held in June 2025.

The Route 6 initiative will help the Chippewa Cree Tribe build a future rooted in self-reliance, cultural strength, and community well-being. Through investments in infrastructure, local enterprise, food and energy systems, and healing-centered development, this initiative aims to:

Reduce dependence on external systems by expanding Tribal control over land, energy, and economic activity	Revitalize cultural identity and language as foundations for sustainable development	Create the conditions for locally owned businesses and Tribal professionals to succeed
Strengthen Tribal sovereignty through policies that align with cultural values and community leadership	Foster inclusive opportunities for youth, Elders, and families to heal, grow, and thrive	Ensure the corridor becomes a space of connection, commerce, healing, and long-term prosperity for current and future generations

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

4.2 Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles reflect community-defined values that will shape economic development along the Route 6 corridor, ensuring that all investments reinforce Tribal sovereignty, cultural integrity, and long-term community well-being.

1
Tribal Sovereignty & Self-Reliance

Community leadership guides every step. Route 6 investments should strengthen Tribal authority over land, utilities, and local enterprise, and eventually reduce dependence on external agencies.

2
Culture as Foundation

Cultural revitalization and language are central to healing, economic development, and identity. Elders lead, youth deliver, and guests are welcomed with mutual respect through approved protocols.

3
Community Ownership & Wealth Circulation

Businesses and assets along the corridor should remain in community hands, using cooperative and local ownership models to circulate wealth and opportunity.

4
Healing-Centered Development

Generational Trauma was consistently identified as a critical factor inhibiting progress, therefore, this awareness should guide physical and programmatic investments. Every project — from housing to business space — is an opportunity for individual and community healing.

5
Youth-Led Future

The next generation should be engaged now. Investments can create space for youth to build skills, find belonging, and become future leaders, entrepreneurs, and culture bearers.

6
Food and Energy Sovereignty

Control over food and energy systems is essential for health, affordability, and independence. Route 6 can anchor a locally grown, locally powered economy.

7
Inclusive Participation & Equity

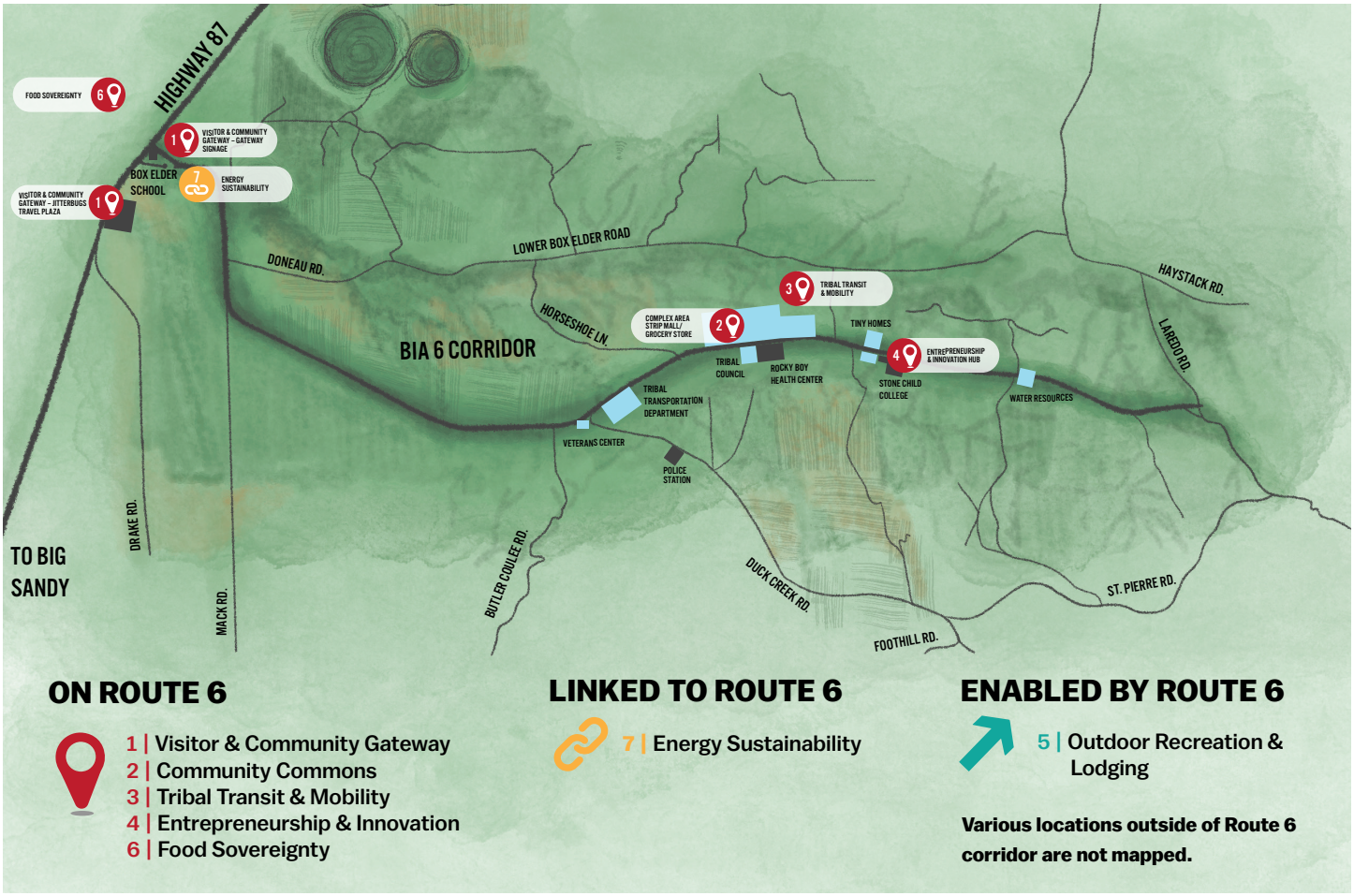
Programs and spaces should support all community members — including women, Elders, veterans, single adults, youth, and returning citizens — to access housing, work, green space, healthcare, and entrepreneurship.

8
Place-Based, Community-Led Planning

All development along Route 6 should reflect local geography, cultural significance, and lived experience. Zoning, building, and land use decisions should protect what is sacred and enable what is needed.

4.3 Overarching Strategic Framework: Community Centered and Corridor-First

The Route 6 strategic framework is grounded in community priorities and values and is designed as a Corridor-First Development approach.



Route 6 is the most critical artery on RBIR, intersecting 14 of the 18 settlement villages, incorporating the main broadband fiber route, and significant transportation improvements have been proposed. Concentrating new enterprises along—or closely connected to—this spine ensures accessible services, minimizes wildlife disturbance, and leverages a potential $28M investment in Route 6 reconstruction including improved pavement and drainage.

Accordingly, the 10-mile stretch of Route 6 is envisioned as RBIR's emerging "Main Street." Development is structured through three complementary lenses.

The On–Linked–Enabled Framework is described below, outlining how different types of development align with Route 6 to optimize visibility, access, and impact:

THE ON–LINKED–ENABLED DEVELOPMENT LENS		
Lens	**Description**	**Rationale**
ON Route 6	Traffic-generating enterprises positioned directly along Route 6, such as fuel stops, grocery stores, laundromats, cafés, and lodging facilities.	Captures household and visitor spending, ensures access to utilities, and minimizes disruption to wildlife.
LINKED TO Route 6	Projects located one parcel back from the corridor—such as accommodations, microgrids, or light manufacturing.	Maintains aesthetics and tranquility while benefiting from utility-ready zones and market linkages.
ENABLED BY Route 6	Interior enterprises that become feasible as visitor flow, freight movement, and broadband improve—e.g., a zipline park, sawmill, ski jump, or buffalo range.	Unlocks development potential of interior lands, expanding markets for agriculture, recreation, and light industry.

Cluster and Connector Logic

Development should occur in defined nodes such as the Community & Visitor Gateway, Community Commons, and Entrepreneurship & Innovation, so residents can meet multiple needs in one trip and entrepreneurs can benefit from shared infrastructure (foot traffic, co-working spaces and parcel shipping). A Tribal Transit Shuttle should connect these nodes, ensuring safe and equitable mobility for Elders, students, and visitors, especially in winter conditions.

Incremental and Inclusive Rollout

A phased implementation approach is recommended. Phasing can begin with low-capital initiatives (like markets and signage) before scaling to larger vertical builds (e.g., meat processing, supermarket and gas station). Construction contracts could prioritize local apprenticeships, and retail spaces could be designed to support first-time vendors. This staged rollout reduces risk, builds local capacity, and allows cultural protocols to guide design as community trust and investor confidence grow.

Main Street Design Framework: Prioritizing Tribal Member Services

Building a "Main Street" from the ground up along Route 6 requires adapting rural master planning and complete streets best practices to RBIR's cultural and physical landscape. The local design framework ensures that Route 6 functions not only as a transportation corridor but also as a social and cultural spine, supporting small business growth, public health, and cultural expression for the community of approximately 4,500 on-reservation residents.

5

Unlocking the Corridor's Potential:
Critical Precursor Actions

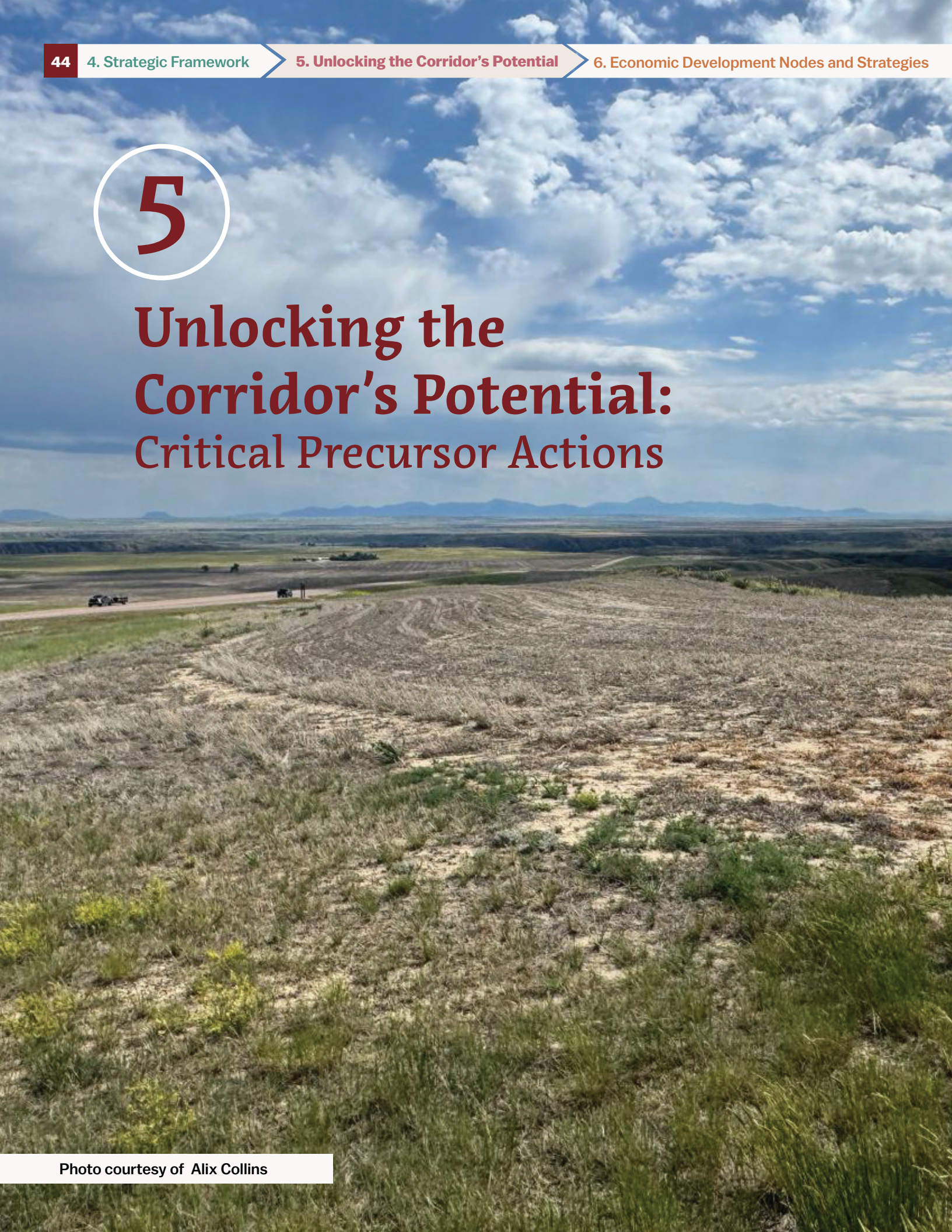


Photo courtesy of Alix Collins

While the Route 6 corridor holds strong promise as Rocky Boy's "Main Street," Tribal members and department representatives emphasized the importance of taking several foundational steps before advancing node development. These enabling actions will help reduce risk, improve coordination, and ensure that all projects are grounded in community values and support long-term sustainability.

Photo courtesy of Alix Collins

1. Establish Zoning and Land Use Policies

The Tribe currently operates without a formal land use plan or zoning framework. Developing these tools will support clear, consistent land use decisions across the corridor, encourage clustered development, help protect culturally significant areas, and reduce the potential for land use conflicts. The zoning system can be created as part of a master lease and broader master planning effort, in alignment with Tribal priorities and long-term development goals.

2. Conduct Comprehensive Soil Testing

Before building along Route 6, a detailed soil analysis can help identify areas where development is physically feasible. Some locations may contain soft soils that require reinforcement, which can significantly influence cost and design decisions. Soil data also supports future zoning efforts, infrastructure investments, and housing priorities, contributing to more informed and sustainable planning.

3. Secure THPO Clearance for Ground Disturbance

The entire Route 6 corridor falls within a five-mile buffer zone of culturally significant sites, including a buffalo jump visible from the Tribal complex. Per the Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO), all projects involving ground disturbance require THPO clearance to proceed. Establishing a process for early and ongoing coordination with the THPO supports timely review and helps safeguard important cultural resources.

4. Develop and Enforce Building Codes

There is an urgent need to adopt and enforce Tribal building codes and safety standards. In the absence of consistent enforcement mechanisms, construction quality may vary, increasing long-term costs and risks. Building codes can be tailored to reflect the Tribe's climate, infrastructure conditions, and future development goals, helping to ensure durability, safety, and sustainability across projects.

5. Assess Utility and Resource Capacity

Infrastructure limitations could constrain development along Route 6. There is not yet a clear understanding of the capacity of the water, wastewater, and energy systems to support expanded business activity. For example, when the new water pipeline is complete, will it be sufficient to support high-consumption businesses such as car washes or commercial kitchens? Similarly, the energy system's capacity to support new businesses should be evaluated, especially if renewable energy is prioritized.

6. Explore a Master Lease Framework

The current BIA leasing process presents significant barriers to entrepreneurs and homeowners. Community members recommended that the Tribe explore a master lease structure under the HEARTH Act, informed by a land use plan and Tribal zoning codes. This would enable a Tribal corporation to sublease parcels directly to Tribal members or business owners, greatly reducing time and cost while maintaining Tribal oversight.

7. Define Cultural Protocols and Property Protections

The THPO has proposed a community-led process to define how cultural resources are managed, interpreted, and shared with the public. These protocols would serve as the foundation for a visitor code of conduct, ensuring cultural respect and education. The Tribe could also work with the Native American Rights Fund (NARF) to develop a Cultural Property Code and Ordinance to formally protect cultural assets and guide future interpretation, use, and enforcement.

8. Launch a Comprehensive Planning Process

Several Tribal administrators emphasized the importance of a comprehensive plan—not just for Route 6 but for the full reservation. Rather than proceeding with isolated plans, it is recommended that the Tribe review the current CEDS process and consider pursuing a comprehensive plan that could serve as a CEDS-equivalent, aligning land use, economic development, infrastructure, and governance in one integrated document. The comprehensive plan would provide the coordination framework necessary to activate the full vision for the corridor and beyond.

Photo courtesy of Water Enviornmental Technologies

6 Economic Development Nodes and Strategies

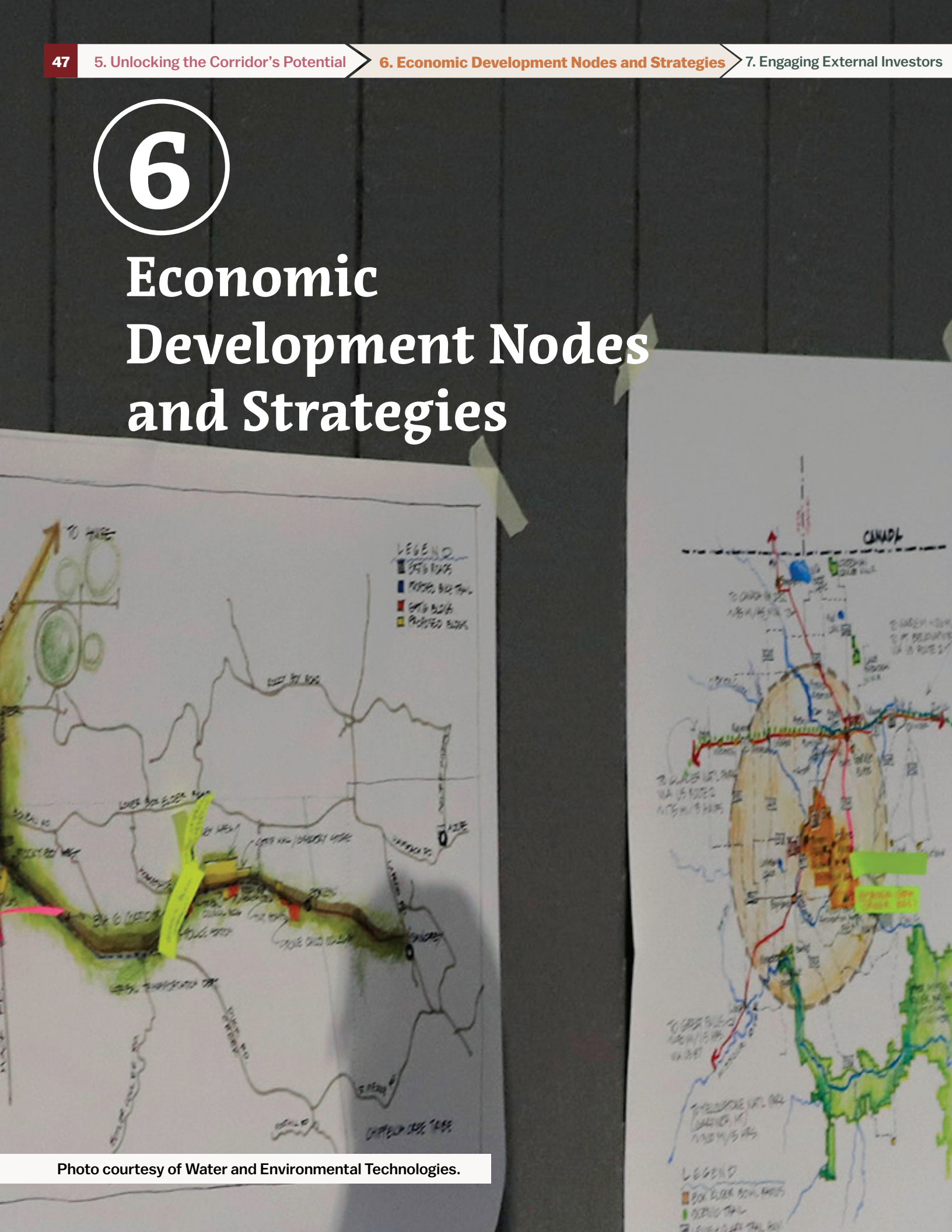


Photo courtesy of Water and Environmental Technologies.

This section outlines seven proposed economic development nodes that are either On Route 6, Linked to Route 6, or Enabled by Route 6. This economic scan takes a broader view by design—recognizing that sustaining business activity along Route 6 depends not only on the corridor itself, but on development opportunities that serve and strengthen the wider community.

Each node represents a concentrated area of activity designed to anchor economic growth, improve quality of life, and reflect Tribal values. The descriptions illustrate how each node is intended to function, the community benefits it aims to deliver, and the key steps required to move from concept to implementation.

All cost estimates presented are preliminary and intended for strategic planning purposes only. These estimates have been re-calculated with publicly available information and lean design principles to favor cost-efficiency and feasibility. Each node's budget emphasizes phasing, right-sizing, and use of cost-effective materials or partnerships (e.g. modular construction, local labor, or reuse of exisxting facilities) to minimize capital outlay Additional scoping, engineering, and market analysis will be needed to refine these figures.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

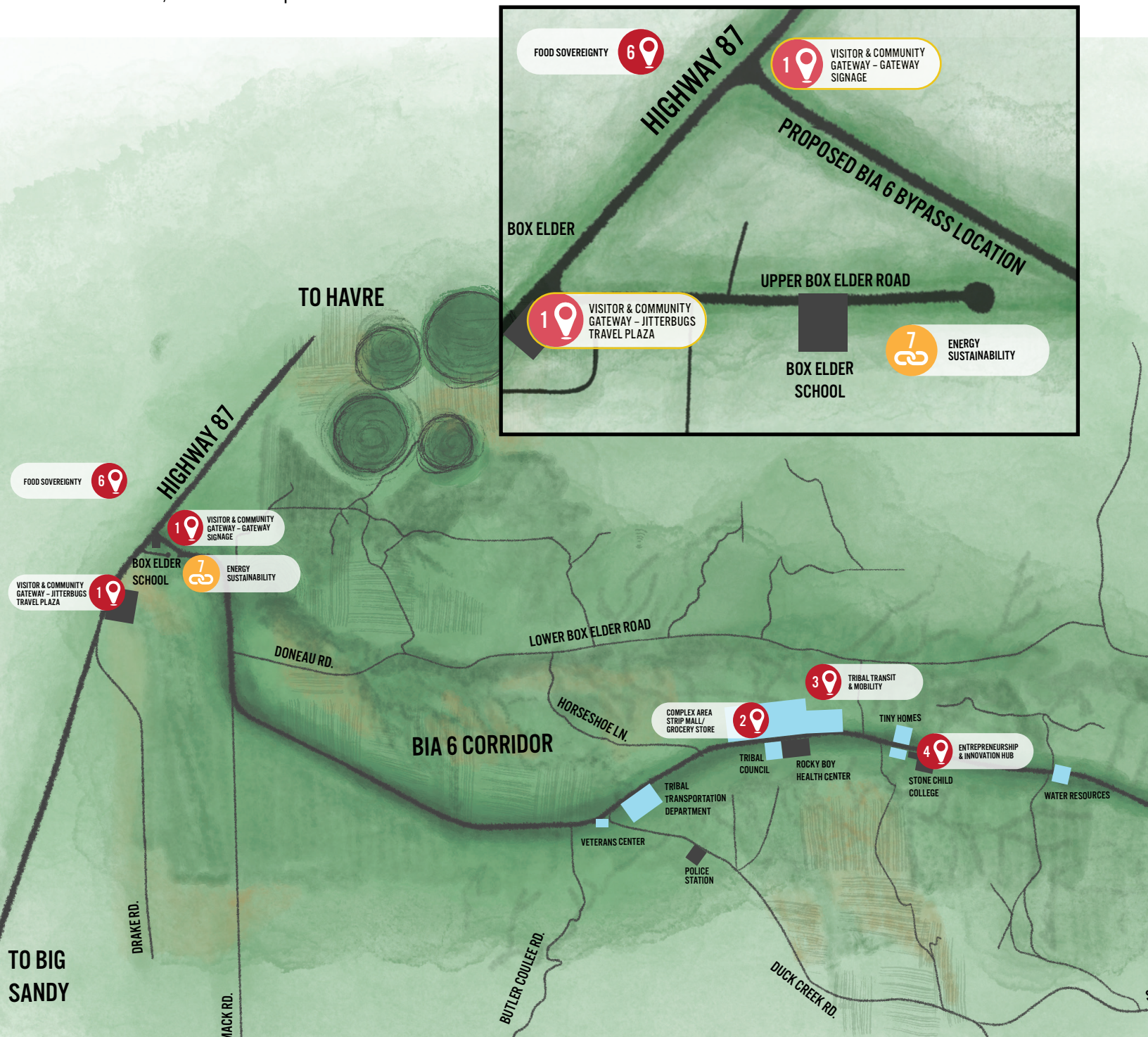
6.1 Community and Visitor Gateway Node

On Route 6

The Community and Visitor Gateway Node is designed to serve both residents and travelers, while also welcoming visitors to the RBIR. This integrated node consists of two mutually reinforcing components:

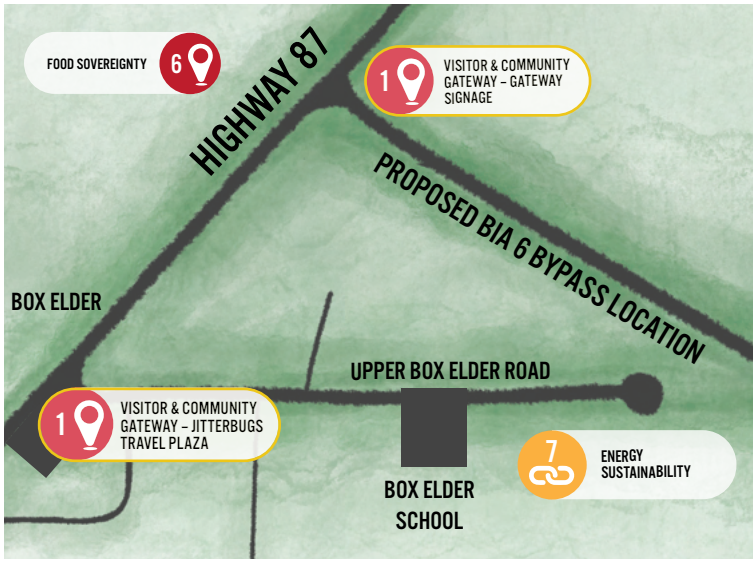
- Travel Plaza, a regional service center that addresses a critical 37-mile service gap in fuel and convenience services, capturing both local and through traffic; and,
- Community and Visitor Gateway, a welcome point that introduces travelers to the Tribe's heritage and tourism opportunities.

Together, these components form the western "front door" to the reservation and anchor the RBIR's emerging Route 6 Main Street corridor, combining essential service delivery with cultural interpretation, small business incubation, and tourism promotion.



6.1.1 Travel Plaza

On Route 6



Location

Centered on the existing "Jitterbugs" gas station site (US 87 at Box Elder turn-off), with adjacent parcels to be acquired and consolidated into a unified business footprint of ~3 acres. This location maximizes visibility to US 87 traffic while conveniently serving local residents.

Corridor Classification

On Route 6 – located directly along the corridor (including the junction with US 87) to leverage visibility and traffic volumes.

Purpose

Leverage US 87 highway traffic while meeting the RBIR community's need for fuel, convenience retail, and basic automotive services on-reservation. The Travel Plaza aims to reduce economic leakage (by providing goods/services that currently force off-reservation trips) and to create year-round jobs and training opportunities.

Potential Community Champions

Chippewa Cree Community Development Corporation; Atoske Holding Company (Chippewa Cree Tribe's business arm); CCT Tribal Transit Program (for integrated transit stop); CCT Tourism Department; and the Tribal Council's Economic Development Committee.

Estimated Investment

$4.38 million. This budget reflects a full-service facility build-out (fuel station, store, bays, etc.) as detailed below.

6.1.1.1 Description

The Travel Plaza is designed to intercept US 87 through-traffic and local drivers, providing essential services and capturing expenditures that currently leave the reservation. The facility would provide year-round employment (20–25 jobs) and apprenticeships, reduce household costs (by offering local fuel/food options), and meet unmet fuel, grocery, and vehicle service needs. Key features of the proposed Travel Plaza include:

- **Fueling:** Four gasoline dispensers and two high-flow diesel/DEF dispensers under a lit canopy. This would fill a notable 37-mile service gap on US 87 between Havre and Big Sandy, which currently lacks a modern fuel station offering both gas and diesel. By offering diesel (which is not reliably available in the nearby off-reservation area) and DEF, the plaza would position itself to capture significant truck traffic.
- **Light Vehicle Services:** Two auto-service bays for light maintenance (e.g. oil changes, tire repair, basic mechanical fixes). This would address the absence of local vehicle services. Many residents currently must drive to Havre (30+ miles) for routine auto maintenance.
- **Parking:** Approximately 40 parking stalls, including 10–15 dedicated pull-through slots for semi-trucks and RVs. Adequate truck parking would attract long-haul drivers to stop for fuel and rest, which could substantially boost sales in the store.
- **Convenience Store:** A 3,000 sq ft convenience store offering grab-and-go food, basic groceries, beverages, and travel supplies. The store could feature a fast-food counter or quick-serve restaurant (potentially a national chain franchise or local diner), as well as an expanded selection of healthy options and local products.

Higher-margin retail sales are critical to profitability. For instance, fuel alone has thin margins of ~1–2%, whereas convenience items typically see net margins of 5–27%. Thus, the store would be essential for the plaza's financial sustainability.

- **Parcel Shipping/Pick-up Hub:** A Tribal-operated parcel hub within the store, including package lockers (Amazon Hub, UPS, FedEx). This would allow residents to send/receive packages locally rather than traveling to Havre and would support e-commerce entrepreneurs on RBIR. A standard locker unit (approximately 6' × 3' × 2') only requires power and internet; Amazon provides and maintains it at no cost to the store, making this a low-cost amenity.

6.1.1.2 Current Activities and Gaps to Be Filled

The site serves both as a stop for US 87 traffic and as a critical convenience store for Tribal members, who lack access to a supermarket on the reservation. Travelers along US 87 face a 37-mile service gap between Havre and Big Sandy—an area without a modern fuel station offering both gasoline and diesel, convenience retail, or light vehicle maintenance.

Introducing diesel services would give RBIR a competitive edge, as Big Sandy does not currently offer diesel fuel—creating a significant opportunity for revenue generation (see financial model below). Traffic data from ATR Station W-115 near the site shows an average of 2,507 vehicles per day, increasing to over 3,100 during peak summer months, with 13.8 percent consisting of heavy trucks. BIA Route 6, which connects fourteen reservation villages, sees roughly 2,000 vehicles daily. By 2025, average daily traffic is projected to reach 2,507 vehicles, increasing to 3,122 during peak periods, with similar truck volumes. August 2024 traffic counts indicate an annual growth rate of approximately two percent.

Despite this traffic, residents must still leave the reservation for groceries, household supplies, and vehicle services. While the planned acquisition of the 0.46-acre Jitterbugs site is an important first step, the parcel is too small to accommodate the proposed full-scale travel plaza, which requires at least three acres to meet truck-turning radii and regulatory setbacks. Additionally, the site will require soil remediation before development can proceed.

6.1.1.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

The proposed Travel Plaza addresses a 37-mile service gap on US 87, intercepting local and through traffic and anchoring the RBIR's emerging Route 6 "Main Street." By capturing this demand, the project would reduce economic leakage, create local jobs, and provide critical fuel, retail and vehicle services that currently are unavailable on the RBIR.

Key recommendations to advance this project include:

- **Expand the Site Footprint:** Building on the planned Jitterbugs acquisition, aggressively pursue adjacent land (via purchase or long-term lease) to assemble ~3 acres. Without sufficient land, the full-service concept isn't feasible.
- **Prioritize Diesel and Truck Amenities:** Offering high-flow diesel pumps and ample truck parking will attract commercial trucks that currently bypass the area. Rocky Boy's junction could capture a significant portion of trucking traffic on this corridor. Truck drivers also spend on food and other items, boosting plaza revenues. This competitive edge (diesel availability and parking) should be a core focus.
- **Leverage Brand Partnerships:** Consider affiliating with a major fuel brand (Sinclair, Exxon, etc.) for equipment and signage support. Fuel distributors often provide upfront incentives, volume rebates, and co-op marketing funds for new gas stations. For example, an oil company might finance the pump and canopy installation (>$200k value) in exchange for a multi-year supply contract. The Tribe should solicit proposals from distributors to compare incentive packages.

By capturing existing demand and providing in-demand services, the Travel Plaza can generate significant financial returns for the Tribe while meeting community needs. A preliminary pro forma suggests that at a 12–15% traffic capture rate, the plaza could gross on the order of $4–5 million in annual sales, yielding an estimated $300k–$500k in net income to reinvest in Tribal programs. This represents a missed income generating opportunity, or money that is currently being spent elsewhere (leakage) but could circulate on the reservation.

Building on the planned acquisition of Jitterbugs, the Tribe has an opportunity to expand the site into a full-service multi-use plaza. A minimum of 3 acres is required to accommodate the full Travel Plaza—including a fuel island, store, parking, setbacks, and septic field—and to ensure compliance with truck turning radii and safety regulations. The current Jitterbugs parcel (~0.46 acres) is too small, which means the Tribe would need to acquire and consolidate adjacent parcels. Atoske Holdings, LLC has confirmed that this is possible. Environmental due diligence has been completed, and while there is evidence of historical fuel tank leakage, only limited soil remediation is anticipated.

This development would enable Rocky Boy to recapture a portion of off-Reservation fuel and grocery spending, create 20–25 year-round jobs and apprenticeship opportunities, and serve an estimated 2,500 vehicles per day (13.8 percent of which are heavy trucks). At a 15 percent traffic capture rate, the plaza could generate approximately $500,000 per year in free cash flow for Tribal programs.

Traffic data supports the project's viability:

Table 6-1: Travel Plaza Traffic Volume, Capture Benchmark, and Commercial Viability Metrics

US 87 ATR Station W-115	AADT 2 507 vehicles per day (VPD); 13.8 percent heavy vehicles; July peak 3 122 VPD (MDT 2025).
Route 6	~2,077 VPD linking Reservation villages (Tribal BUILD application, 2025)
Industry Benchmark	Viable above 2,000 VPD with 12–18 percent capture (NACS 2024)

A minimum land area of three acres is required to meet truck maneuvering and regulatory setback standards. However, the current Jitterbugs site poses several constraints, as shown below:

Table 6-2: Site Suitability Assessment: Physical and Regulatory Constraints

Criterion	Requirement	Existing (0.46 ac)	Pass/Fail
Parcel size	≥ 3 ac	0.46 ac (Hill Co. GIS)	Fail
Setback (UST & canopy)	≥ 25 ft from ROW	~18 ft	Fail
Truck turning radius (WB-62)	120 ft outer radius	Not achievable	Fail
Soil/UST remediation risk	No legacy single-wall tanks	Single-wall tanks present	High risk

These limitations confirm that the existing Jitterbugs parcel is too small and constrained for full development. To implement this economic development node, the Tribe should consider purchasing additional adjacent parcels to reach at least three acres. The site will also require demolition and limited soil remediation, as reports indicate contamination that must be addressed to qualify for commercial financing. Fortunately, remediation efforts may be supported through the State of Montana's environmental funding programs.[23]

23 Rocky Boy Health Center. (2025). Rocky Boy walk audit: Box Elder Road.

6.1.1.4 Key Elements of Implementation

Prior to construction and operation, the Tribe will need to secure the following approvals and meet regulatory obligations:

- NEPA Categorical Exclusion (<5 acres, no historic properties) – under BIA rules
- EPA UST Permit – 40 CFR §280-compliant (double-wall tanks with automatic tank gauging)
- Montana DEQ SWPPP & Stormwater Permit
- FEMA No-Rise Certification
- BIA Building Permit and payment of Tribal Employment Rights Ordinance (TERO) fees (~2%)

These compliance steps are essential for site development, public safety, and eligibility for financing.

Below, early and later actions are outlined. Early actions are priority steps that can be initiated in the next one to two years. These are often lower-cost, high-impact efforts that lay the groundwork for longer-term goals. Later actions are those that build on early momentum and may require more time, coordination, or resources to implement—typically planned for three years and beyond.

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- Finalize the acquisition of Jitterbug's business and site.
- Ahead of the new Travel Plaza project launch, operate the Jitterbugs business to gain experience in retail and limited service station operations.
- Acquire and assemble adjacent land parcels.
- Develop architectural, site development, business plan, and investment prospectus for the new Travel Plaza.
- Secure State of Montana soil remediation financing.
- Approach at least three lenders to investigate the maximum possible financing and terms.
- Approach prospective investors for possible joint venture opportunities, including the current owner of the site.
- Approach at least five oil companies and negotiate branding, rebate and incentive upfront payment terms.

Long-Term Actions (3+ years)

This phase creates the revenue foundation by investing in:

- Site prep & drainage for heavy truck loads and freeze-thaw durability.
- Demolishing the current site and conduct soil remediation
- Constructing the new travel plaza and acquiring the required equipment for oil change, tire repair, and mechanic bays.
- Constructing the convenience store, including fast food point for wider customer service and increased revenue potential, blending grocery and quick serve, including the following:
  - Installing double-wall USTs + leak detection to meet EPA 40 CFR §280 and ensure winter reserves.
  - Installing high-flow diesel/DEF dispensers for modern diesel engines.
  - Building two service bays for oil, tire, and light mechanical.
  - Including utility tie-ins & septic for BIA permitting.
- Training prospective staff from the Tribe on business operations, bookkeeping, customer service, and promotion. RBIR can investigate the possibility of coordinating this initiative with support from the Small Business Development Center of Bear Paw Development Corporation.

Depending on the availability of funds, the table below describes a detailed phasing plan.

Table 6-3: Travel Plaza Development Phases and Key Implementation Activities

Phase	Key Activities
I. Foundational Actions	• Close land/business purchase • Interim C-store operation • Secure remediation grants • Engage lenders for term sheet • Complete NEPA Categorical Exclusion
II. Site Assembly & Remediation	• Demolish existing structures • Excavate and remediate soil/USTs per EPA/DEQ standards • Assemble final 3 acre site • Finalize site/building plans and permits
III. Construction & Fit-Out	• Install double-wall USTs + leak detection • Pave forecourt with heavy-duty drainage design (140,000 sq ft @ $7/ft^2) • Erect canopy, dispensers, and POS infrastructure • Build C-store shell and fit-out service bays
IV. Launch & Optimization	• Open full plaza operations • Roll out loyalty/fleet programs • Connect Tribal shuttle and wayfinding signage (see 7.1B) • Monitor against 5-year plan; adjust pricing/service mix

Brand Affiliation Analysis

Branding the Travel Plaza with a national or regional fuel supplier can provide critical advantages, including upfront incentives, wholesale fuel discounts, and co-marketing support. A brand affiliation also lends credibility and customer familiarity, which is especially valuable in attracting highway traffic. The Tribe should consider analyzing up to five fuel brands. An initial scan is presented below, but a more detailed investigation is essential to secure specific and latest data.

Table 6-4: Fuel Brand Partnership Analysis: Incentives, Benefits, and Trade-offs

Brand	Pros	Cons	Rebate/Incentive
ExxonMobil	Premium brand; Techron additive	Higher rack price	$0.05/gal rebate; $50k sign-on (5 yr)
Chevron	Strong cards network; marketing support	Limited rural presence	$0.04/gal rebate; $40k upfront
Liberty	Local distributor; flexible terms	Lower brand recognition	$0.06/gal rebate; no upfront
ConocoPhillips	Broad MT network; co-op marketing	Moderate incentives	$0.05/gal; $30k bonus
Sinclair	Competitive rack pricing; green credit	Fewer loyalty perks	$0.03/gal; $20k canopy credit

Key Considerations:

- **Supply & Branding Contracts:** The station agrees to carry one exclusive brand with branded equipment and signage.
- **Rebates:** Typically volume-based discounts off wholesale prices.
- **Upfront Incentives:** Paid lump sums (e.g., for signage or margin support) amortized over 5–7 years.
- **Co-Op Marketing:** Shared cost of local advertising to support traffic and sales.

A thorough comparison and negotiation with these brand partners should be completed prior to finalizing financing and construction.

6.1.1.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates & Financing Options

The estimated costs of developing this node will need to be ascertained based on a detailed business plan. However, initial cost estimates are presented below.

Table 6-5: Travel Plaza Capital Investment Cost Estimates

Line Item	Qty	Unit Cost	Sub-Total ($ in million)	Source/Quote
Site grading & drainage	—	—	$0.40	Knife River (2024)
Asphalt paving (140 000 sq ft @ $7/sq ft)	—	$7/sq ft	$0.98	Knife River
20 k-gal double-wall USTs + piping	2	$200 k each	$0.58	OPW Fueling (2024)
Gasoline dispensers	4	$25 k each	$0.10	Gilbarco (2025)
Diesel/DEF high-flow dispensers	2	$35 k each	$0.07	Gilbarco
Forecourt canopy & LEDs	—	—	$0.15	Stellar GC
C-store shell (3 000 sq ft @ $375/sq ft)	—	$375/sq ft	$1.13	Stellar GC
Cooler, shelving, POS	—	—	$0.26	Hussmann & NCR
Service-bay equipment (lifts, lube)	2 bays	—	$0.17	Rotary Lift & Graco
Utilities tie-in & septic	—	—	$0.30	Route 6 utility plan
TOTAL			**$4.38**	

To support the $4.38 million capital investment required for the Rocky Boy's Travel Plaza, several financing models can be considered. These range from fully equity-funded joint ventures to models that leverage targeted debt for specific project components. The Tribe can also pursue brand affiliation incentives and would need to comply with applicable environmental and permitting requirements.

Table 6-6: Travel Plaza Financing Model Comparison

Option	Description	Structure	Terms & Metrics
All-Equity Joint Venture	Project is funded entirely with equity capital and there is no project-level debt.	Investor provides $4.36 million equity; Tribe contributes land	8% preferred return; 45/55 profit split; Internal Rate of Return (IRR) ~14–16 %
Leveraged Joint Venture	Combines equity with project-level debt to enhance returns via financial leverage.	$2.5 million senior debt @ 7%/7 years; $1.86 million equity	DSCR ≥ 1.25×; IRR ~18–20 %
Fee-Simple Land Acquisition Model	Tribe proceeds with the purchase of Jitterbugs, on private land, along with adjacent property of at least 3 acres, outright. Then, the Tribe would secure financing against that fee-simple title.	Tribe borrows 70% LTV @ 7%/10 years on fee-simple acquisition; equity covers 30% ($1.31 million)	UST remediation escrow; DSCR target 1.3×
Minimal-Debt Joint Venture (debt on forecourt kit only)	Limits borrowing to only the most high-turnover, revenue-generating assets	Finance only USTs/ dispensers/canopy ($1.2 million @ 7%/7 yrs); equity covers remaining $3.16 million	IRR ~21 %; payback ~6 yrs; DSCR ~1.55×

Detailed Financing Structures

All-Equity Joint Venture (JV)

In this structure, the investor provides the full $4.38 million in capital, while the Tribe contributes land, permits, and operational oversight through a jointly governed Limited Liability Company. The investor receives an 8% preferred return, after which profits are split 45% to the investor and 55% to the Tribe. This model avoids debt, simplifies implementation, and maximizes long-term flexibility and local benefit.

Leveraged Joint Venture

This approach blends $2.5 million in senior debt (7% interest over 7 years) with $2.85 million in equity from the investor (or co-investment with the Tribe). The debt is serviced from project cash flow with a minimum Debt Service Coverage Ratio (DSCR) of 1.25×. The Tribe retains board representation and focuses on local hiring and permitting.

Fee-Simple Acquisition Model

The Tribe purchases the Jitterbugs site and adjoining parcels outright and uses the land as collateral for debt financing. A typical package includes 70% Loan-to-Value (LTV) debt at 7% over 10 years, with equity covering the remainder, including ~$1.2million in remediation and site costs. The Tribe assumes responsibility for early costs and environmental clearance.

Minimal-Debt Joint Venture

This option limits debt to high-turnover, income-generating assets only—such as fuel tanks, dispensers, and canopy—estimated at $1.2 million. The remaining development is equity-financed. This structure yields a strong Internal Rate of Return (IRR), reduces debt burden, and provides flexibility in early years.

Five-Year Operating Model & Sensitivity Analysis

Table 6-7: Travel Plaza Financial Model Scenarios

Scenario	Capture Yr 3	EBITDA Yr 3 (US $M)	IRR (10 yr)	DSCR Yr 3
Downside (10%)	10 percent	0.99	11 percent	1.20×
Base (13%)	13 percent	1.32	15 percent	1.40×
Upside (16%)	16 percent	1.60	19 percent	1.56×

Key assumptions:

- Diesel margin: $0.46/gal (OPIS 2025)
- Convenience store gross margin: 32% (NACS 2024)
- Selling, General and Administrative expenses: 8.5%

6.1.1.6 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

To offer relevant context for RBIR, the following are examples of federally recognized Tribes that have developed highway-oriented travel plaza or convenience store projects on their Tribal lands.

Shinnecock Indian Nation (1,292 enrolled members)

In August 2024 the Shinnecock Nation celebrated the groundbreaking of a new 10-acre gas station and travel plaza on tribal land just north of the westbound lanes of Sunrise Highway (Route 27) in Hampton Bays, NY.

Pauma Band of Luiseño Mission Indians (236 enrolled members)

On January 5, 2025 the Pauma Yuima Band broke ground on the Pauma Heritage Quik Stop at Highway 76 & Pauma Reservation Road in Pauma Valley, CA. This 12,000 ft^2 mixed-use travel center will feature a convenience market, 24-pump fueling, a drive-through Starbucks, and EV chargers, and is expected to open in fall 2025.

Klamath Tribes (≈5,700 enrolled members)

In 2010 the Klamath Tribes completed construction of a truck stop adjacent to their Kla-Mo-Ya Casino on U.S. Route 97 in Chiloquin, OR. It includes two covered fueling stations and a small food mart and was built mainly with tribal labor (a possibility for Rocky Boy's to replicate, thereby saving costs and creating local job opportunities).

Twenty-Nine Palms Band of Mission Indians (25 enrolled members)

On August 26, 2024, the tribe debuted Shelee's Travel Center in Coachella, CA, a 12,000 sq ft convenience store with 59 fueling positions (36 for autos, 15 for trucks), plus plans for a truck wash, repair facility, and lounge in early 2025.

Cameron Travel Center (Navajo Nation, ~300,000 enrolled members)

In operation since 1916 as a trading post on US-89 between Flagstaff and Grand Canyon Village, the Cameron Travel Center fills a 40-mile service gap. It serves an average of 2,000–2,500 vehicles per day (13–15 % heavy trucks), closely matching Rocky Boy's US 87 ATR W-115 counts.

- **Heritage & Tourism Synergy:** Nearly a century of brand recognition among both Navajo residents and Grand Canyon tourists drives year-round local patronage plus pronounced summer peaks.
- **Service Mix:** Full gasoline and high-flow diesel dispensers; ~3,000 ft² C-store with local crafts; light auto-service bays; café/foodservice, mirroring the RBIR's proposed project size.

6.1.2 Rocky Boy's Community and Visitor Gateway

On Route 6

Location

Western entrance to the reservation, where US 87 meets Upper Box Elder Road. The Tribe may consider purchasing the condemned house on the corner of Route 6 and 87 for the interpretive center as an option.

Corridor Classification

On Route 6 – located on the proposed new bypass

Purpose

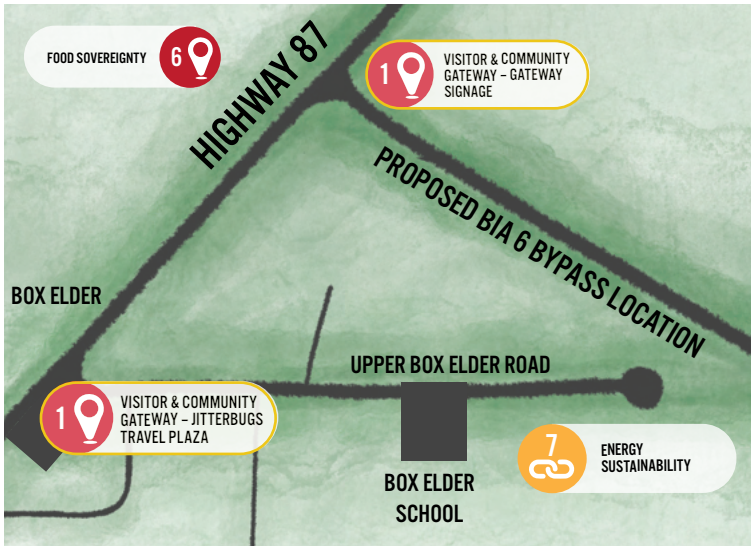
Serve as the formal welcome point for guests and a central hub for cultural interpretation and Tribal tourism services.

Potential Community Champions

Interested Tribal members, relevant Tribal departments, Tribal Historic Preservation Office

Investment Estimate

$1.33 million – $1.43 million.



6.1.2.1 Description

The proposed Rocky Boy's Community and Visitor Gateway can initially be located within the Travel Plaza complex, serving as a cost-effective, short-term solution for providing community and visitor services. This approach avoids the significant capital investment required for a standalone facility while establishing a clear point of entry. The space could include an activities reservation desk and function as a gathering spot for guided tours as requested by the Buffalo Ranch, offering orientation and information about available experiences on the RBIR.

In the longer term, and subject to funding availability, the we propose a standalone Cultural Gateway at the western entrance of the Reservation, where US 87 meets Upper Box Elder Road. This new node would be supported by a planned bypass road to reroute traffic away from the nearby school, enhancing safety and improving site access. The Community and Visitor Gateway would be anchored by a tribally run interpretive center or museum and include a tourism office, visitor reservation desk, and a designated departure point for guided tours.

Additional features would include a retail shop showcasing local arts and crafts, a coffee shop, restaurants, and a visitor-oriented Tribal Transit stop. This gateway could also serve as an extension of the Creative Maker Yard (see Section 7.4), hosting two to three rotating artisans who demonstrate and sell traditional and contemporary Indigenous works. This integrated space would not only deepen the visitor experience but also provide retail and entrepreneurial opportunities for Tribal members, helping to promote cultural expression and economic development.

6.1.2.2 Current Activities and Gaps to be Filled

Currently, there is no welcome point, orientation to the community or booking system for possible activities. The development of the Rocky Boy's Community and Visitor Gateway presents a timely opportunity to fill critical gaps in visitor infrastructure, cultural interpretation, and local business engagement. While the short-term use of the Travel Plaza provides an important starting point, establishing a standalone Community and Visitor Gateway in the long-term will require coordinated actions across land use, infrastructure, cultural programming, and tourism service delivery.

6.1.2.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

The development of the Rocky Boy's Community and Visitor Gateway presents an important opportunity to address key gaps in visitor infrastructure, cultural interpretation, and local economic engagement. While the short-term use of the Travel Plaza offers a practical starting point, the long-term vision for a standalone Community and Visitor Gateway could bring together multiple functions that enhance the visitor experience and elevate Rocky Boy's cultural presence.

One current gap is the absence of a centralized welcome point or booking system for existing and emerging tourism activities. Visitors arriving at the Reservation have no designated orientation space or means of reserving tours and cultural experiences. To address this, it is recommended that the Tribe explore the implementation of an online tour booking platform—such as FareHarbor, Rezdy, or Checkfront—to support reservations, scheduling, and guide coordination in a streamlined manner.

There is also a need to define the structure and layout of the creative enterprise component envisioned as part of the Gateway. The Tribe could consider developing a formal incubator design for the Creative Maker Yard (see Section 7.4), informed by models supported through the Office of Indian Economic Development's Indian Business Incubator Program. This design may include dedicated retail and demonstration space for two to three rotating artisans, offering visitors an engaging cultural experience while supporting local entrepreneurship.

Land tenure and site readiness are additional areas where proactive steps could advance project development. It may be advisable to finalize a master lease for the tribally owned gas station near the proposed bypass route, which would help secure the footprint of the future node. In parallel, the Tribe could seek to secure a HEARTH Act master lease for the bypass right-of-way, enabling greater flexibility and control over development timelines and permitting processes.

Photo courtesy of Water and Enviornmental Technologies

To strengthen the cultural integrity of the proposed interpretive center or museum, it is recommended that the Tribe engage with experienced partners such as the Makah Cultural & Research Center. Their curatorial expertise and experience advising other Tribal nations could support the development of meaningful and respectful exhibits. Additional guidance may also be sought from the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums (ATALM), which offers a broad range of resources for exhibit planning, governance, and collections management.

It is recommended that the Tribe consider a hybrid business structure that combines Tribal enterprise management of the node with opportunities to lease retail spaces—such as a café or artisan craft shop—to local Tribal entrepreneurs. This approach could support community-owned businesses while maintaining overall quality and consistency of the visitor experience.

The Visitor and Community Gateway Node could be positioned to capture regional visitor markets, particularly travelers moving between Havre and Great Falls. By leveraging its strategic location along the US 87 corridor, the node may serve both as a convenient rest stop and a destination that draws visitors into the Rocky Boy Indian Reservation for cultural experiences, local shopping, and guided tours when available.

Finally, to enable physical development of the site, the Tribe may consider obtaining the necessary permits from the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) for the proposed bypass alignment and associated infrastructure improvements, such as a fuel canopy or transit stop. This would ensure regulatory compliance and improve site access and safety.

Collectively, these recommended actions could help transform the Rocky Boy Community and Visitor Gateway from a modest interim facility into a dynamic cultural and tourism hub that can serve as both a point of entry for guests and a platform for community pride, economic opportunity, and cultural education.

6.1.2.4 Key Components of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- Install interpretive signage to introduce cultural themes and orient visitors
- Pilot pop-up maker stalls to test artisan retail concepts
- Launch the first fashion incubator workshop to showcase Tribal design and build momentum for the Creative Maker Yard concept to be based later in the Entrepreneurship and Innovation Node
- Install Wayfinding & Branding Signage: Erect culturally informed signs and banners to identify the Community Commons Node and direct visitors to key attractions mentioned under the Outdoors and Recreation Node

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

- Construct the interpretive center as a permanent cultural anchor for the Visitor and Community Gateway Node
- Recruit Tribal microenterprises—such as artisans and craft food producers—to operate from the facility, creating a dynamic, visitor-facing business environment

6.1.2.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

Table 6-8: Visitor Gateway and Community Gateway Node Preliminary Cost Categories and Cost Estimates

Category	Description	Estimated Cost Range ($ Thousands)
Interpretive Center/ Museum Building	Basic 3,000–4,000 sq ft building (pre-engineered or modest construction).	$700K
Land Preparation (No Acquisition)	Site grading, utilities, parking, drainage.	$100K – $150K
Tribal Transit Stop & Amenities	Covered bus stop, seating, signage, lighting.	$30K
Retail Fit-Out (Café, Art Shop)	Basic interior finishes, kitchen/counter installs, and artisan display.	$100K – $150K
Exhibits, Cultural Content & Displays	Curation, interpretive signage, light A/V, cultural storytelling.	$200K
Online Booking Platform	One-time platform setup fee (e.g., Rezdy or FareHarbor).	$2K upfront
Wayfinding Signage	One gateway and 10 outdoor signs informing the recreation nodes	$200,000
TOTAL		**$1.33-1.43 million**

The Tribe may pursue grant funding to support construction of the interpretive center, while also raising private capital from enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation, philanthropic organizations, and business partners. Potential funding sources include:

- National Endowment for the Humanities planning grants
- State Small Business Credit Initiative loan guarantees
- Philanthropic support via enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation

6.1.2.6 Examples for from Other Tribal Nations

Comparable initiatives or best practices from other Tribes that can inspire design, partnerships, or implementation approaches, include:

1. Bois Forte Heritage Museum (Tower, MN)

Size
~3,000 sq ft Three Chiefs Cultural Center

Why it works
Entirely tribal-curated exhibits cover Ojibwe history, artistry, and lifeways. Despite its modest size, visitors often rate it "better" than larger institutions.

Features
Compact, authentic storytelling grounded in community voice—ideal for a high-impact gateway center.

Funding and Sustainability
The museum was initially funded in the early 2000s through a combination of tribal general funds and a federal grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Initial exhibit curation also received support from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Today, the museum continues to receive external operating and programming support from IMLS, NEH, and Minnesota Legacy funds. Earned revenue comes from a modest admission fee, a gift shop featuring tribal artisans, and periodic events. The Bois Forte Band subsidizes staffing through its Cultural Resources Division, ensuring consistent operations and community alignment.

2. Him-Dak EcoMuseum & Gathering Place (Ak-Chin, AZ)

Size
~3,500 sq ft multipurpose center

Highlights
Multi-use adaptability within a modest footprint; ideal for Maker Yard workshops, exhibits, and community education

Features
Combines tribal artifact storage, cultural displays, library, classroom, and gathering space. It is designed for modular indoor/outdoor programming.

Funding and Sustainability
The Him-Dak Museum was established in the 1990s, utilizing initial funding from a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Community Development Block Grant, supplemented by tribal contributions of land and labor. Start-up support also came from the Administration for Native Americans (ANA) for cultural documentation. Today, it receives continued federal support through ANA, IMLS, and National Park Service Tribal Heritage grants, along with periodic tribal allocations. The museum operates under the Ak-Chin Cultural Resources Department, ensuring integration with education, language revitalization, and ceremonial programming. It occasionally earns revenue from tours and cultural events.

3. Three Chiefs Culture Center (People's Center) (Flathead Reservation, MT)

Size
~4,000 sq ft (temporary facility in a converted log building)

Highlights
- Operated by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
- Functions as an interpretive museum, community gathering place, and educational space

Features
A living cultural hub offering rotating exhibits, workshops, and traditional storytelling

Funding and Sustainability
The original People's Center was launched in the mid-1990s with seed funding from the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, combined with an IMLS Native American Museum Services grant. Following a fire in 2020, the center relocated to its current temporary building. It now receives recurring external support from IMLS, the Montana Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Donations from visitors and proceeds from its gift shop also support operating costs. The Tribes continue to provide partial staffing and maintenance funding. A capital campaign for a new permanent facility is underway, targeting federal infrastructure funds and philanthropic donors.

6.2 Community Commons Node

On Route 6

Location

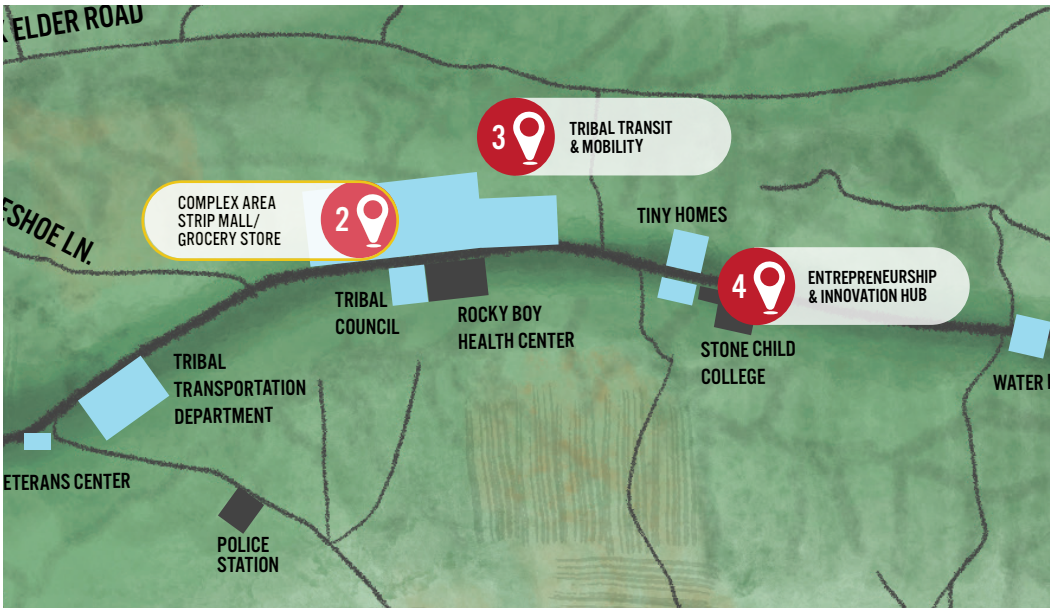
Mile Post 3–4, mid-corridor near the new Tribal Council (Administration) Building.

Corridor Classification

On Route 6 – located directly along the corridor, this site will serve as the central hub for daily economic and social activity and will be co-located in the Tribe's proposed Complex/Strip Mall/Grocery Store Complex.

Purpose

Function as a service-rich community core, designed to meet daily needs and co-locate key Tribal services.



Potential Community Champions

Key Tribal members, departments, organizations, or business owners advocating for or positioned to lead efforts in this node. Successful entrepreneurs working from the reservation or in Havre can be catalysts for early stage development and offer examples to encourage new business startups.

Investment Estimate

~$3.65 million (A phased development beginning with only grocery, laundromat, and utilities might cost ~$2 million, then adding a youth center/park later with separate funds).

6.2.1 Description

This node will co-locate Tribal government facilities with a mix of essential community services, including a grocery store, laundromat, café, children's playground, and flexible spaces for small businesses. Community members voiced strong support for additional amenities such as a youth activity center and a community park with trees, swings, and restrooms. There is also potential to establish market stalls for food vendors and emerging entrepreneurs, including unregistered artisans seeking space to grow their businesses. An adventure gear retail and rental outlet can also be located within this node. The transit facility, serving both Tribal members and visitors, is proposed as adjacent to this node (see the Tribal Transit Node - Section 6.3).

6.2.2 Current Activities and Gaps to be Filled

While several home-based enterprises operate on the reservation, primarily selling to external customers through e-commerce platforms such as fashion designer Rebekah Jarvey, RBIR currently lacks a centralized cluster of services that offers residents convenient access to shopping, commerce, daily essentials, and basic services like laundry. As a result, most household spending occurs off-reservation, leading to significant economic leakage. The need to travel to Havre or other nearby towns for goods and services adds an estimated 30% premium to the cost of living. Establishing a local service and retail hub would not only meet community needs but also create new revenue opportunities by attracting spending from external visitors seeking amenities during their time on the reservation.

6.2.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

The following opportunities have been identified to activate the Community Commons Node, creating a centralized hub that delivers essential services, supports entrepreneurship, and strengthens community cohesion.

Develop a 6,000 ft^2 cooperatively owned grocery store adjacent to a 24-machine laundro-café. This facility is expected to generate consistent daily foot traffic, recapture thousands of dollars in off-reservation spending, and provide affordable, essential goods and services within the community.

A multifunctional youth center offering indoor sports, arts spaces, and after-school programming—alongside an outdoor playground and mini-park with shade trees, swings, and restrooms—can be constructed adjacent to the grocery-laundromat hub.

This configuration will provide a safe, engaging space for children, support part-time employment and youth development, and offer parents a comfortable place to socialize while accessing services.

Construct a weather-protected transit pavilion with culturally branded shelters and a scheduled micro-bus service operated by the Tribal Transit Program. Adjacent market stalls for food vendors and artisans can be included, benefiting from the hub's foot traffic. This setup will boost shuttle ridership, reduce shelter vandalism, and provide low-barrier retail opportunities for informal entrepreneurs through lease arrangements with the Tribe.

6.2.4 Key Components of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- **Pilot Pop-Up Markets & Food Trucks:** Host bi-weekly "Route 6 Market Days" using temporary canopies or trailers to test vendor interest and build foot traffic. Encourage entrepreneurs to invest in food trucks to take advantage of increased activity around the new Community Commons node and the Youth Activity Center.
- **Install Wayfinding & Branding Signage:** Erect culturally-informed signs and banners to identify the Civic & Community Services Node and direct visitors to key amenities (budgeted above).
- Conduct a feasibility study, site selection and costing for building the convenience store and laundromat.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

- **Construct the Cooperative Grocery & Laundro-Café Hub:** Build the full 6,000 ft^2 facility with integrated parcel lockers and café seating, anchored by the Tribal co-op board.
- **Build the Youth Activity Center & Park:** Erect a 4,000 ft^2 multipurpose youth center with adjacent playground, shade structures, and restrooms, programmed in partnership with the Wellness Center.
- **Develop Market Pavilion:** Construct permanent, weather-protected modular market stalls.

6.2.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

This estimate reflects a lean, cost-effective development approach tailored for the RBIR. Components are sized to strike a balance between utility and affordability, utilizing modular/prefabricated structures, as well as essential infrastructure.

Table 6-9: Community Commons Node Capital Investment Cost Estimate

Component	Description & Key Features	Approx. Size	Estimated Cost ($ in Thousands / $ in Millions)
Supermarket (w/ Fresh Produce)	Expanded modular supermarket with walk-in coolers, full produce section, dry goods, and checkout lanes	6,000 sq ft	$1.5M
Laundromat	Simple facility with 8 washers/dryers, folding table, vending machine	800 sq ft	$200K
Café	Very small café with counter service, minimal kitchen/prep space, 1–2 tables	600 sq ft	$100K
Youth Activity Center	Open space for youth lounge, learning, and basic recreation; includes restroom	2,500 sq ft	$750K
Children's Playground	2–3 basic structures (swings, slide), mulch ground, small fence	Outdoor	$90K
Community Park	Open green space with picnic benches, trees, swings, and prefabricated ADA restroom	~10,000 sq ft (outdoor)	$150K
Retail Stalls (10 stalls @ 200 sq ft)	Modular enclosed structure with 10 small stalls, minimal electrical	2,000 sq ft	$400K
Market Stall Area	Gravel pad with 6 simple framed stalls, no plumbing	~2,000 sq ft (outdoor)	$90K
Infrastructure (Utilities + 20-car gravel lot)	Water/sewer/power hookups, solar lighting, parking for 20 vehicles, drainage	N/A	$300K
TOTAL	**Total enclosed space: ~12,400 sq ft Total outdoor space: ~12,000 sq ft**		**~$3.65 million**

Investment Phasing

Costs can be managed by phasing (for instance, building only grocery, laundromat, and utilities first might cost ~$2 million, then adding a youth center/park later when additional funds become available). The Tribe is encouraged to evaluate the following potential funding sources to identify the most suitable option(s) to finance all or portions of the proposed activities:

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) & Credit Unions

- Access low-interest loans or loan guarantees through Montana-based CDFIs and credit unions, and conventional banks (CRA)

Philanthropic & Impact Capital

- Grants from foundations focused on rural health, youth development, or Native economic advancement
- Crowdfunding or matched-gift campaigns targeting the enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs)

- Engage regional grocers, laundromat operators, or café entrepreneurs in lease agreements, with the Tribe providing the premises, workforce, and partners contributing inventory and working capital

Tribal Funds & Bonds

- Consider leveraging Tribal General Funds or issuing Tribal Revenue Bonds as a last-resort strategy to close any remaining financing gaps

Photo courtesy of Alix Collins

6.2.6 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

1. Warm Springs Commons (Warm Springs Reservation, OR)

Size

~8,000 sq ft mixed-use hub

Why it works

Combines a Tribal-run grocery co-op, café, and laundromat—capturing 85% of local grocery spend and reducing off-reservation trips by 60%.

Features

Full-service grocery co-op stocked with local and regional foods

- Sit-down café featuring traditional Warm Springs dishes
- Self-service laundromat with drop-off options and community meeting space

Funding and Sustainability

Capital construction was funded by a combination of a HUD ICDBG and an EDA Public Works grant, plus some regional food system grants and Tribal matching funds. For operations, the grocery and café revenues cover wages and utilities. A creative rotating vendor/employee co-op model helps to keep overhead low and accountability high. They also secured a USDA REAP grant to add solar panels and energy-efficient freezers, cutting utility costs.

Lessons

A similar clustering at Rocky Boy's could achieve high recapture of local dollars. Also, using external grants to build capacity and infrastructure (then relying on sales for operations) is a proven approach.

2. Blackfeet Transit & Marketplace (Blackfeet Reservation, MT)

Description

The Blackfeet Tribe (~17,000 members) integrated a transit hub with a marketplace by constructing a 3,500 sq ft enclosed pavilion that serves dual purposes. The building provides a covered waiting area for the Tribal transit buses (with real-time arrival displays, etc.) and also houses 20 small vendor stalls that host a weekly farmers market and seasonal artisan pop-up shops.

Why it works

Integrates a covered shuttle waiting area with a weekly farmers' market and artisan pop-ups—driving a 45% increase in shuttle ridership within one year.

Features

Full-service grocery co-op stocked with local and regional foods

- Enclosed pavilion adjacent to transit hub
- Twenty rentable stalls for produce, crafts, and prepared foods
- Shuttle bays with real-time arrival displays

Funding and Sustainability

- **Capital:** FTA Tribal Transit Grant (Section 5311(c)) and Montana DOT rural mobility programs; USDA Rural Business Development Grant (RBDG) for vendor pavilion
- **Operations:** FTA 5311 operating funds subsidize transit; stall rentals and market day fees cover pavilion maintenance; streamlined cost-sharing via Tribal Transportation Program agreement

3. Shiprock Growers & Artisans Market (Navajo Nation, NM)

Size

2-acre open-air market with permanent restrooms and shade pavilions

Why it works

Generated over $500K in vendor sales annually and incubated 30 new micro-enterprises within its first two years.

- A local initiative created a 2-acre open-air market space with permanent spacious vendor areas under shade structures
- ADA-compliant restrooms and hand-wash stations
- On-site business counseling kiosk and CDFI referral desk

Funding and Sustainability

- **Capital:** USDA AMS Local Food Promotion Program and Navajo Nation CARES Act funds; IHS sanitation grants and foundation support for restrooms/pavilions
- **Operations:** Vendor fees ($10–$25 per day) fund cleaning, security, and restroom upkeep; promoted as a gateway for CDFI microloans and small-business grants, creating a self-reinforcing revenue ecosystem

6.3 Tribal Transit and Mobility Node

On Route 6

Location

Behind the Community Commons Node

Corridor Classification

On Route 6 – located on a parcel directly behind the corridor

Purpose

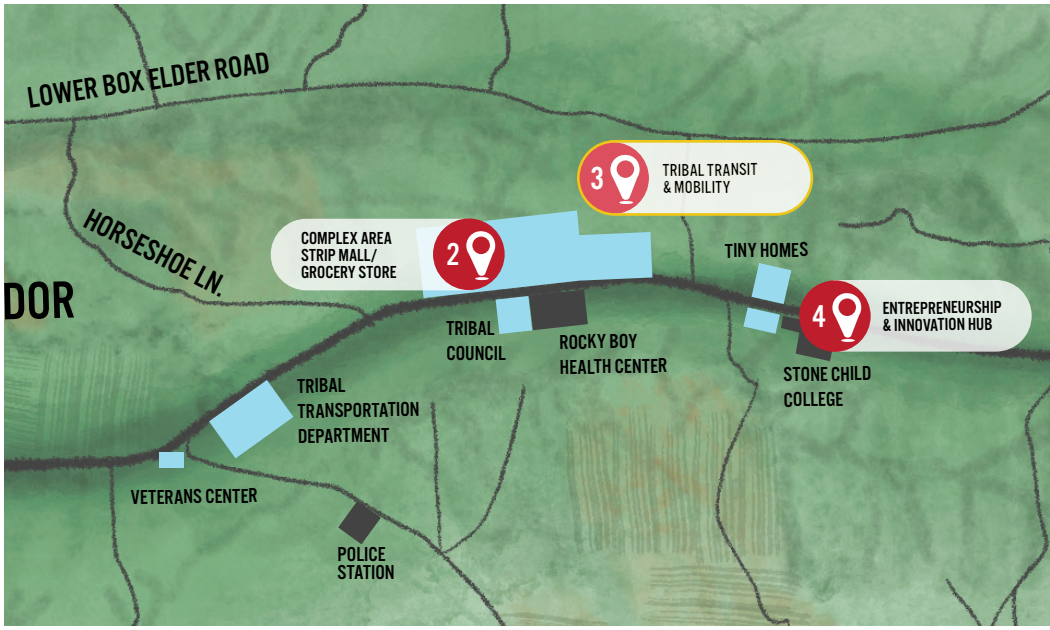
Serve as the core of a unified Tribal transit system, connecting residents and visitors across the corridor and region.

Potential Community Champions

Key Tribal members, Tribal Transit Program.

Investment Estimate

$1,260,000



6.3.1 Description

While the Tribe currently operates three buses and employs two drivers under a demand-based system, there is no dedicated transit facility. This node presents an opportunity to establish a transit hub that would house transit staff, support scheduled routes.

A centralized hub would also enable visitor shuttle service to key destinations such as the Buffalo Ranch, ski bowl, and interpretive center. Drawing on successful models like Flathead Transit (see Community Commons Node - Section 6.2) and other examples listed below, this facility could serve as a cornerstone for a more coordinated and accessible transit system—integrating services across healthcare, education, and tourism.

6.3.2 Current Activities and Gaps to be Filled

The Tribe operates a small, demand-response transit system with three 25-seat buses and two drivers but lacks a dedicated facility for staff, maintenance, passenger amenities, or scheduled service infrastructure. Service is not regularly scheduled and unmarked, shelters are deteriorated and vulnerable to vandalism, and awareness of the system is low, particularly among elders, low-income families, and residents without cars. Without fixed routes, branded stops, real-time information, or a central hub, Tribal Transit cannot reliably connect community members to schools, clinics, grocery services, or off-reservation destinations like Havre and Great Falls.

6.3.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

Co-locating a Transit & Mobility Node with the Community Commons Node will anchor a unified system, improve visibility, and provide critical rider amenities. Below are proposed solutions and actionable next steps for development.

Land Use & Facility Siting

- Allocate a 2,500 ft² site immediately behind the Community Commons Node/supermarket-laundromat hub for the Transit Center, including driver lounge, dispatch office, restrooms, and sheltered waiting area. This will provide maximum utility for the community while shielding the station from Route 6 traffic, thereby enhancing safety and minimizing visual pollution.
- Zone the parcel for "Public Transit" under the forthcoming Tribal land-use code to streamline approvals and HEARTH master-lease issuance.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

Service Design & Partnerships

- Establish fixed-route loops along Route 6 with timed connections to demand-response services, drawing on Flathead Transit's rural model.
- Partner with the Federal Transit Administration under Section 5311(c) and the Tribal Transit Program for capital purchases (new buses, shelters) and operational support, expanding the fleet by at least two buses and, in time, replacing the used ones.

Shelter & Amenities Upgrades

- Install durable, culturally branded shelters with integrated seating, lighting, and solar trickle-chargers at all stops to reduce vandalism and enhance safety, and include route maps in English and Chippewa and Cree at the Transit Center and primary stops.

Governance & Operations

- Establish a Tribal Transit Authority Board that is effectively functional and coordinates with healthcare, education, and tourism representatives to oversee scheduling, fare policy, and performance metrics.

Business Model & Revenue

- Implement a dual rate system: free for tribal residents and fee-based for visitors, and pursue local sponsorships (e.g., Buffalo Rock Communications branding on shelters).
- Offer shuttle services for a higher fee to regional attractions (Buffalo Ranch, Ski Bowl, interpretive center) to generate fare revenue and broaden ridership.
- Consider outsourcing the fleet to a private operator that will also operate regular Havre and Great Falls routes that would generate revenue to make the operation more economically viable.

6.3.4 Key Components of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- **Shelter Prototyping:** Install two solar-lit, vandal-resistant shelters at high-traffic stops.
- **Branded Signage & Maps:** Erect wayfinding signage and post fixed-route schedules at 5 key locations along Route 6.
- **Pilot Fixed Route:** Launch a weekday circulator loop connecting the Transit Center, clinic, school, and grocery hub, operating on a 60-minute headway.
- **Community Outreach:** Host "Transit Open House" events at the hub to demonstrate schedules, fare products, and ridership procedures.
- **Expand the number of drivers:** Depending on consistent demand demonstrated for a period of several months, a fourth driver may be added to extend service to the evenings and weekends.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

- **Construct Permanent Transit Center:** Build a 3,000 ft² hub with indoor waiting area, maintenance bay, office space, and restrooms.
- **Fleet Expansion & Electrification:** As demand grows over time, acquire two additional 25-seat buses—including at least one electric vehicle—powered by the planned micro-grid at MP 0.
- **Regional Connector Service:** Coordinate with Mountain Line (Great Falls) and Amtrak Empire Builder to establish shuttle links timed with intercity departures/arrivals.
- **Integrated Mobility Platform:** Develop a smartphone/unified-call system for trip planning, mobile fare payment, and real-time alerts.

This document is guided by the community. It lays a foundation not only for economic growth, but also for understanding the deeper needs of our people—so we can offer opportunities and pathways that foster healing and strengthen resilience.

Javon Wing — Project Manager and Tribal Grant Writer

6.3.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

Table 6-10: Tribal Transit Center Cost Estimate

Line Item	Qty / Area	Unit Cost	Subtotal ($ in Thousands)
Site preparation & grading	lump sum	–	$80K
Shell & core build-out	3,000 sq	$300 / sq ft	$900K
Basic interior fit-out (office + restrooms)	lump sum	–	$100K
Single transit shelter & platform	1 shelter	$50K each	$50K
Furniture, fixtures & AV	lump sum	–	$50K
Utilities tie-ins (power, data, water)	lump sum	–	$80K
TOTAL			**$1,260K**

The Tribe may consider pursuing a diversified mix of public, private, and Tribal resources to support transit-related infrastructure and operations:

- **Federal Transit Grants:** FTA Section 5311(c) for rural operations and capital; FTA 5310 for enhanced mobility of seniors and individuals with disabilities. USDOT Build America Bureau: Rural & Tribal Assistance Pilot Program (RTAPP); Up to $360,000 per project for technical services; USDOT Build America Bureau: TIFIA Rural Projects Initiative (Loan); Consider TIFIA loan if facility scope exceeds $10 million, or bundle facility with BIA Route 6 improvements to meet threshold.
- **Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) – Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP):** Funds safety-related infrastructure such as crosswalks and ADA-compliant curb ramps at transit stops.
- **Public–Private Partnerships:** Explore shelter sponsorships from entities like Buffalo Rock Communications or local cooperative partners.
- **Private Grants:** Seek funding from foundations focused on rural transportation, mobility access, and elder support services.
- **Operating Revenue Generation:** Develop revenue streams from fares and advertising on buses.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

6.3.6 Examples for Other Tribal Nations

The following transit models demonstrate how Tribes are leveraging federal grants, tribal investments, and public-agency partnerships to build culturally appropriate, demand-responsive services that enhance mobility, healthcare access, and economic opportunity in rural and reservation communities.

1. Quechan Indian Tribe Shuttle Planning (Fort Yuma Reservation, AZ/CA)

Community Size

~4,000 enrolled members

Overview

Under FTA Tribal Transit Program planning grants, the Tribe is designing a deviated-route shuttle to link Winterhaven, Yuma, and on-reservation communities, expanding access to healthcare and tribal enterprises.

Key Features

- Community needs assessments
- Route modeling
- Coordination with Yuma County Area Transit (YCAT) network

Funding and Sustainability

Planning funded through FTA Tribal Transit Formula (5311(c)) grants and tribal matching contributions; future operations will leverage a partnership with YCIPTA.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

2. Bishop Paiute Tribe Dial-A-Rid (Bishop Reservation, CA)

Community Size

1,588 residents

Overview

Operates daily Dial-A-Ride service under FTA Tribal Transit grants via the Eastern Sierra Transit Authority, connecting reservation households with Bishop's medical center, schools, and job sites.

Key Features

- Demand-response scheduling
- Subsidized fares for seniors and persons with disabilities
- Coordinated stops at Paiute Plaza

Funding and Sustainability

Supported by FTA Section 5311 Tribal Transit Program grants and local matching funds; modest passenger fares help underwrite ongoing operations.

3. Tulalip Tribes On-Demand Transit (Tulalip Reservation, WA)

Community Size

10,969 residents (2020 Census)

Overview

Launched an app-based on-demand microtransit service in partnership with Via Transportation, complementing four fixed-route shuttles serving Quil Ceda Village, the casino complex, and Marysville.

Key Features

- Mobile-app booking and rider profiles
- Dynamic, real-time routing
- Integrated payment via Orca regional transit cards
- ADA-accessible vehicles

Funding and Sustainability

Funded through FTA Tribal Transit grants, tribal budget allocations, and service contracts with Via; fare integration with regional transit supports revenue sharing.

6.4 Entrepreneurship and Innovation Node

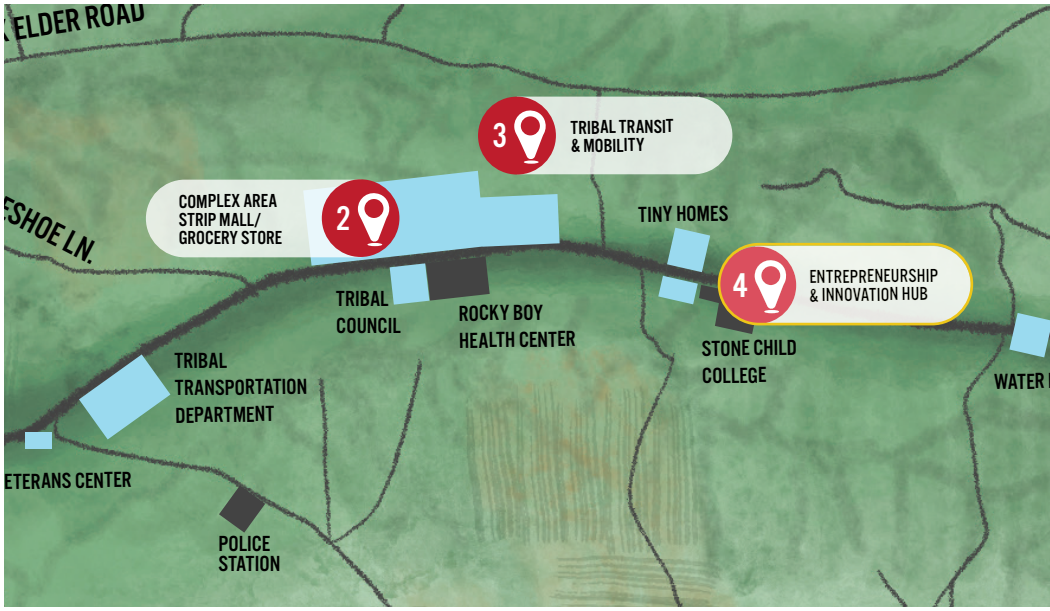
On Route 6

Location
Adjacent to Stone Child College or, preferably, space made available in the college.

Corridor Classification
On Route 6 – located on the campus of Stone Child College

Purpose
Provide dedicated space for new and growing Tribal businesses, including maker spaces, business incubators, and access to lending support.

Potential Community Champions
Planning Department, local entrepreneurs with operations in the reservation or in nearby towns, Stone Child College, Community Health Center.



Investment Estimate
$135,000 - No Construction Scenario; Add $200,000 for a new building.

6.4.1 Description

To foster a thriving culture of Tribal entrepreneurship, the Entrepreneurship & Innovation Node could offer a purpose-built coworking environment, hands-on maker spaces, and flexible training facilities—supported by mentorship and access to capital. By co-locating key partners such as Junior Achievement programs, Small Business Development Center (SBDC) advisors (both in-person and virtual), CDFI lending experts, and Tribal economic development staff under one roof, the node will create a dynamic environment for collaboration, idea exchange, and structured learning.

Entrepreneurs would have access to modular studios for product prototyping, dedicated workstations for refining business plans, and a revolving microloan fund complemented by on-site financial literacy workshops. Regular guest-speaker events featuring members of the Great Falls Chamber of Commerce, Havre professionals, and other regional experts would strengthen market linkages and mentorship networks.

The Node would also serve as a catalyst for launching a Tribal business-lending initiative, supported through partnerships with off-reservation CDFIs and credit unions. A signature feature of the Node will be the Creative Maker Yard—an incubation and light production space designed to support fashion makers, tech startups, and small-scale producers. This space would offer access to capital, coaching, and the facilities needed to grow. A retail section showcasing Tribal fashion, cottage industries, and artisan goods can also be included, creating a platform for visibility and sales.

6.4.2 Current Activities and Gaps to be Filled

Stone Child College offers business education, while the new health center provides life skills training—positioning both institutions as strong anchors for programs that promote entrepreneurship among youth and adults. These efforts can be enriched by learning from successful local entrepreneurs such as Rebekah Jarvey and Bobbi Favel. Creating a dedicated RBIR Trade and Investment Development Service office (see proposal in Engaging External Investors - section 8) to promote inward investment and engage with enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation can also play a key role in fostering business growth and can help connect aspiring entrepreneurs with external partners, mentorship opportunities, and support networks to advance Tribal enterprise development.

The proposed Entrepreneurship & Innovation Node has the potential to convert shared spaces and expert partnerships into measurable outcomes and long-term community benefits. It responds directly to persistent barriers that have limited the growth of Tribal enterprise and private-sector development on the reservation—while also unlocking new opportunities for economic self-determination and innovation. It addresses the following challenges.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

An estimated $135 million in annual Tribal household and government spending currently leaves the reservation, largely due to the absence of locally available goods and services. This represents a critical missed opportunity to recapture and recirculate capital within the Tribal economy.

Private business activity on the reservation remains limited, consisting primarily of small, family-run operations such as gas stations, salons, and general stores. Many aspiring entrepreneurs face significant hurdles in getting started or expanding operations, particularly along high-potential corridors like Route 6.

One of the most frequently cited obstacles is the difficulty of securing commercial land. Complex BIA leasing procedures, coupled with a shortage of shovel-ready sites, make it challenging for entrepreneurs to establish or grow businesses on Tribal lands.

Start-up capital is difficult to access, and supporting infrastructure—such as commercial utilities, broadband, and physical workspace—is limited or non-existent in many parts of the reservation. These constraints have forced some Tribal members to launch and operate businesses off-reservation despite their desire to invest and grow within their own community.

A particularly urgent gap is the lack of reliable shipping and logistics infrastructure. Entrepreneurs and residents alike stressed the need for faster, more dependable shipping services—such as UPS and FedEx—to support both inbound supplies and outbound product delivery.

There is strong demand for foundational business skills training in areas such as financial management, strategic planning, and marketing. In addition, entrepreneurs would benefit from wraparound support services, mentorship, and access to shared tools and production space.

6.4.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

The opportunities enabled by this Node will translate shared spaces and expert partnerships into measurable outcomes and community-wide benefits.

Rising Youth Entrepreneurship and Cultural Enterprise

There is a growing entrepreneurial spirit among younger Tribal members, particularly in fields such as fashion design, e-commerce, solar services, and food production. Many are interested in launching businesses rooted in cultural identity and sustainability. Elders and cultural mentors like John Murie are playing a vital role in transmitting traditional knowledge—such as moccasin-making and hide tanning—creating fertile ground for cultural entrepreneurship.

Support for an Incubator and Maker Facility

Community members have expressed strong support for a physical hub—ideally located along Route 6—that offers shared workspace, business incubation services, and cooperative production tools. Such a facility could also house retail, shipping, and light manufacturing components, enabling entrepreneurs to reduce reliance on outside service providers while building new market linkages.

Momentum for Policy and Planning Reforms

Addressing the underlying constraints to private-sector growth—particularly around land access, permitting, and infrastructure—will require coordinated efforts in policy reform and land use planning. The Node can serve as a visible anchor for these efforts, signaling a commitment to unlocking local enterprise potential.

Catalyzing Public-Private Partnerships

By co-locating partners such as SBDC advisors, CDFI lenders, and the proposed RBIR Trade and Investment Development Service office (see Engaging External Investors - Section 8), the Node can catalyze new partnerships and funding streams. These partnerships will be essential to seeding a more vibrant business environment—one that supports entrepreneurs from ideation to growth and promotes wealth-building within the community.

Photo courtesy of Water and Enviornmental Technologies

6.4.4 Key Elements of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

Within the first 18 months, the Node can enroll entrepreneurs in cohort-based training. A formal mentorship network, drawing on Great Falls Chamber alumni and the proposed Trade and Investment Development Service office, can be launched to ensure each participant receives a minimum set of one-on-one coaching sessions. Specific activities include:

- Configure dedicated classrooms and workshop bays at Stone Child College to support both hands-on maker activities and entrepreneurship training cohorts. These can be transitioned to the new Node, once it has been built.
- Formalize a consortium agreement with Junior Achievement (JA) of Montana to deliver age-appropriate financial[2] literacy and business-planning modules on-site, reaching students as young as grade 6.
- Launch JA "In a Day" Workshops: Host bi-monthly JA sessions (e.g., JA Finance Park) for middle- and high-schoolers, building early interest in entrepreneurship.
- Establish an MOU with the Great Falls Chamber of Commerce for:
  - Guest-speaker series featuring regional CEOs and small-business owners
  - Mentorship circles pairing Tribal entrepreneurs with Chamber member experts
  - Co-sponsorship of annual pitch competitions and networking mixers
- Engage Montana SBDC, Bear Paw Development Corporation, Clearwater Credit Union, the Montana Chamber Network, and a Native CDFI (e.g., Oweesta) to provide on-demand counseling, loan underwriting support, and technical workshops.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

Over the long term, these concentrated efforts will seed a self-reinforcing entrepreneurial ecosystem: youth exposed early to Junior Achievement's "BizTown" simulations will graduate into adult cohorts, applying accumulated skills to launch fashion lines, food-science ventures, and tech services. As success stories emerge and capital becomes more readily available, the Node will catalyze broader social benefits, curbing outmigration through purpose-driven activity, and fostering intergenerational pride in Tribal enterprise. Specific activities include:

- Design a Business Incubator to be located on the campus of Stone Child College; formalize the SBDC partnership for on-site coaching and quarterly pop-up showcases.
- Launch a tiered Membership Model (Day-Pass, Monthly, Annual) that bundles co-working, maker-bay access, and curated JA workshop credits.
- Seed a revolving loan fund, possibly capitalized via SSBCI or CDFI grants (pending investigation of viability), to offer 0% interest "Startup Learner Loans" up to $10 K, coupled with mandatory JA financial-literacy counseling.
- Coordinate with Tribal Transit to operate a weekday shuttle between the Node and Great Falls Chamber offices, enabling supplier visits, investor pitches, and externship placements.
- Establish the Tribal Business Lending Authority: Transition the microloan fund into a permanent, Tribal-chartered lender with a $1 million capital pool and reserve guarantees.
- Host an Annual "Route 6 Innovation Summit": Convene entrepreneurs, investors, regional economic-development agencies, and the Great Falls Chamber for pitching, awards, and capacity-building workshops.

Connecting to Regional Markets

- **Transit-Enabled Market Access:** By coordinating a dedicated shuttle with Tribal Transit between the Node and the Great Falls and Havre, entrepreneurs will be enabled to participate in networking events and supplier meetings, gaining direct, reliable access to one of Montana's primary business centers. They can also gain cost-effective and coordinated access to retailing options for Tribe-produced goods.
- **E-Commerce & Shared Logistics**: Integration with the Civic Node's UPS/FedEx locker system and shared cargo bays will allow Node entrepreneurs to consolidate shipments to wholesalers and end-customers across the U.S., reducing per-package costs. Combined with the planned gigabit connectivity, this shared logistics model will make e-commerce a viable growth pathway for both light manufacturers and service providers.

Additional Proposed Programming

The following programming concepts are proposed to complement and strengthen the foundational Route 6 Business Incubator, adding practical tools and skill-building opportunities that support Tribal entrepreneurs from idea to implementation.

- **Micro-Voucher & In-Kind Matching Program:** The Tribe can issue vouchers up to $2k for equipment or supplies, with recipients matching in volunteer hours or professional services. A half-day workshop led by the Montana SBDC can teach business-plan basics and life skills like budgeting.
  - Stakeholders: SBDC Advisor; Tribal Procurement Office; Stone Child College Entrepreneurship Center.
  - Partner Program: Teach for America Tribal Micro-Grant.
  - Life Skills: Budgeting workshop by Montana SBDC.
- **Adopt Business Incubator Curriculum from Peer Tribal Nations:** The Tribe can adapt and implement a business incubator curriculum used by other Tribal Nations—such as the model developed by Oglala Lakota Tech—to guide bi-weekly mentorship circles. A co-working and maker space with shared desks, 3D printing, and woodworking tools can support hands-on learning and enterprise development.
  - Stakeholders: Economic Development Dept.; Stone Child College Makerspace; Youth Council Entrepreneurs.
  - Partner Program: Oglala Lakota Tech Native Incubator model.
  - In-Kind Support: Facility space; donated equipment.
  - Life Skills: Time management and communication modules by Tribal Wellness Center.
- **Tribal Procurement Set-Aside & Readiness Workshops:** The Tribe can adopt a 20 % procurement set-aside for tribal MSMEs and host quarterly RFP-response workshops with NAFOA trainers, covering bid writing, contract compliance, and networking.
  - Stakeholders: Tribal Procurement Office; NAFOA; Chamber of Commerce.
  - Partner Program: Navajo Nation Procurement Office model.
  - In-Kind Support: Venue in Council chambers.
  - Life Skills: Networking sessions by Tribal Employment Rights Office.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

- **E-Commerce & Logistics Hub:** The Tribe can launch a reservation-wide online marketplace via Shopify's tribal discount and operate a central USPS/UPS drop-off hub. IT students can set up and maintain the site.
  - Stakeholders: Buffalo Rock Communications; Stone Child College IT Department; Tribal Postal Liaison.
  - Partner Program: Shopify Build a Business Tribal.
  - Life Skills: Customer service etiquette by Tribal Human Services.

6.4.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

The cost estimates below assume that the Entrepreneurship & Innovation Node will be fully co-located within existing space at Stone Child College, thereby avoiding the need for new construction. These estimates cover the costs of furnishing shared workspaces, launching core programs, supporting mentorship and business incubation, and preparing for the eventual development of a standalone facility. If space at Stone Child College is not available, RBIR may identify an alternative existing location to accommodate the Node.

Table 6-11: Entrepreneurship and Innovation Node Cost Estimates

Component	Description	Estimated Cost ($ in Thousands)
Classroom & Workshop Setup	Equip existing college rooms for maker activities and training cohorts (e.g., mobile furniture, whiteboards)	$10K
Technology & Infrastructure	Wi-Fi upgrades, laptops for cohort use, projector, and a conferencing setup	$15K
Maker Tools & Equipment	3D printer, sewing machine, starter maker kits (tools, materials)	$20K
Junior Achievement Programming	Materials, facilitator stipends, workshop logistics for middle and high school outreach	$15K
Mentorship & Guest Events	Honoraria, travel for guest speakers, mentorship circle facilitation	$7.5K
Marketing & Community Engagement	Promotional materials, social media, signage	$5K
Microloan Fund Seeding	Initial seed capital for a revolving microloan program for 5–10 entrepreneurs	$50K
Operations (Year 1)	Supplies, printing, utilities, coordination support (excluding full-time staff)	$12.5K
TOTAL		**$135K**

To fund both the launch and ongoing operations of the Entrepreneurship & Innovation Node, the Tribe may pursue a diversified mix of public, private, and Tribal resources. Below are some suggestions:

Philanthropic & Impact Capital

- **Foundations:** Seek project and capacity-building grants from organizations focused on Indigenous economic development, youth empowerment, and rural innovation (e.g., W.K. Kellogg, MacArthur Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, First Nations Development Institute).
- **Corporate Sponsorships:** Technology partners (e.g., Buffalo Rock Communications, regional banks) can underwrite co-working furnishings, high speed connectivity, and loan-guarantee pools in exchange for naming rights or preferential procurement opportunities.

Event Income

- **Revenue-Share Agreements:** Structure café, retail, and event-space uses on a net-profit share basis, reducing upfront build-out requirements.

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) & Credit Unions

- **Oweesta Corporation & Montana CDFIs:** Leverage technical-assistance grants and debt pools to capitalize the Node's revolving loan fund at below-market rates.

Federal Grants & Technical Assistance

- **Small Business Administration (SBA):** Grants for Rural Business Development and technical-assistance vouchers, plus Capital Access Programs to underwrite microloan guarantee reserves.
- **Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development:** Community Facilities and Rural Business Development grants for infrastructure and incubator programming.
- **Department of Commerce's Minority Business Development Agency (MBDA):** Business center grants to stand up a Tribal Business Center within the Node.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

6.4.6 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

The following examples illustrate how dedicated facilities, culturally grounded programming, and blended funding models can spark entrepreneurship and cultural enterprise in Tribal communities facing similar infrastructure and market access challenges as Rocky Boy's.

1. Artspace Mixed-Use (Pine Ridge Reservation, SD)

Community Size
~10,000 sq ft (opened 2023)

Highlights
- Operated by Artspace Projects, Inc. in partnership with the Oglala Sioux Tribe
- Combines artist studios and training spaces

Features
A dynamic creative hub offering rotating exhibitions, artist-led workshops, open studios, and pop-up markets—designed to foster collaboration and market access for Native artists.

Funding and Sustainability
Seed capital provided by Artspace's national capital campaign and an ArtPlace America grant. Operating costs are covered through tenant rent (scaled to earned income), utility reimbursements, and shared marketing fees. Ongoing program support comes from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the South Dakota Arts Council. A portion of gallery sales and event ticket revenue sustains community outreach and artist residencies.

2. Wind River Startup Challenge (Wind River Reservation, WY)

Program
3-month entrepreneur cohort (launched 2018)

Highlights
- Co-sponsored by Eastern Shoshone & Northern Arapaho Business Councils and the Wyoming Technology Business Center
- Provides one-on-one coaching, workshops in business fundamentals, and a culminating "Pitch Day"

Features
Participants receive curated mentorship, peer networking, and access to pro-bono legal/accounting clinics. The program also pilots market-testing events to validate products and services within reservation communities.

Funding and Sustainability
Initial funding was provided through a U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) Regional Innovation Strategies grant and in-kind support from tribal governments. Seed grants for winners are sourced from private donors and a revolving micro-loan fund managed by the Native American Development Corporation. Program operations are sustained via annual tribal appropriations and sponsorships from regional economic development agencies.

3. Navajo Tech Innovation Center (Crownpoint, NM)

Size
Nine furnished office suites plus shared commons

Highlights
- State-certified incubator operated by Navajo Technical University
- Integrates cultural-business fusion workshops with modern startup supports

Features
Offers conference rooms, prototyping lab, commercial kitchen, high-speed internet, and regular "Diné Demo Days." Cultural advisers embed traditional governance and language principles into business curricula.

Funding and Sustainability
Built with USDA Rural Business Development grants and matching tribal funds. Suite rentals (on sliding-scale leases) and workshop fees generate recurring revenue. Ongoing support from the Navajo Nation's Division of Economic Development and periodic National Science Foundation (NSF) innovation grants cover programming and staff.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

4. Fort Belknap Business Incubator (Fort Belknap Reservation, MT)

Community Size
~5,000 sq ft facility

Highlights
- Established through a FY 1999 HUD Rural Housing & Economic Development grant
- Managed by Fort Belknap College's Small Business Development Center (SBDC)

Features
Provides shared office equipment, co-working desks, private meeting rooms, and technical consultations in marketing, finance, and grant writing. Hosts quarterly "Idea Labs" for pitching and peer feedback.

Funding and Sustainability
Capital construction financed by HUD and matching tribe funds. Ongoing operations are underwritten by the SBDC's federal Title III funding and a modest fee-for-service model. Additional revenue comes from third-party trainings and state economic development contracts.

5. Four Bands Community Fund Incubator (Cheyenne River Reservation, SD)

Community Size
~5,000 sq ft multi-use incubator

Highlights
- Operated by Four Bands Community Fund, a Native CDFI
- Offers free utilities, Wi-Fi, and bookkeeping services for Lakota entrepreneurs

Features
Includes private offices, a communal boardroom, on-site loan officers, and biweekly "Lakota Business Circles" for peer coaching. Integrates culturally specific lending products (both consumer and business lines of credit).

Funding and Sustainability
Initial build-out underwritten by USDA Rural Development and philanthropic contributions. Operating expenses are met through interest income from CDFI-managed loans and nominal monthly workspace fees. Ongoing capacity building is funded by CDFI Intermediary Relending Program (IRP) grants and partnerships with Tribal Employment Rights Offices (TEROs).

6.5 Outdoor Recreation and Lodging Node

Location
Multiple points: 1) Ski Bowl and Cabins; 2) Tipi Village.

Corridor Classification
Enabled by Route 6 – facilitating traffic via the corridor to various sites across the Reservation.

ENABLED BY Route 6
Interior lands made viable by corridor investment (e.g., tourism, ag operations).

*** Not featured on map**

Purpose
Serve locals and visitors seeking outdoor adventure, wildlife viewing, and cultural experiences on traditional lands.

Potential Community Champions
Tribal Historic Preservation Office; Tribal Tourism Office; Buffalo Ranch; Box Elder Community Council; army veterans with outdoor skills as potential guides; Department of Natural Resources.

Investment Estimate
$420,000

6.5.1 Description

This node will transform Route 6 into a true year-round outdoor adventure gateway by leveraging its direct access to the Bear Paw Ski Bowl spur and the entrance to Beaver Creek Camp. Located in the heart of the Reservation and serving as a corridor to the stunning Bear Paw Mountains, it offers strong potential for hiking, biking, fishing, hunting, and skiing. Its proximity to regional attractions such as the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls and the Buffalo Jump in Havre also creates opportunities for cross-promotion and increased visitor spending.

This concept directly aligns with the priorities identified in the Tourism Feasibility Study, which found strong support among tribal members for expanded tourism (94% in favor) and highlighted the mountains, culturally significant sites, the Agency area, Highway 87, and the Ski Bowl among preferred tourism areas. The study also recommended starting with modest investments—such as campground upgrades, improved signage, and guided outdoor tours—which are reflected in the proposed lodge revitalization, updated cabins, and seasonal Tipi Village glamping camp for this node.

By integrating Chippewa Cree cultural experiences with seasonal outdoor activities—including buffalo watching, horseback riding, and wellness retreats—this node this responds to visitor preferences for museums, hiking, and camping, while addressing service needs for restaurants, lodging, and gift shops. Anchored by a full-service gear and guide center, updated cabins, a revitalized lodge, and a seasonal Tipi Village glamping camp, the site has the potential to position Rocky Boy both as a unique overnight cultural-adventure destination and a high-value day trip within Montana's broader tourism network.

6.5.2 Current Activities and Gaps to Be Filled

Currently, Bear Paw Ski Bowl offers downhill skiing and tubing during the winter months, but visitors must bring their own equipment—representing a missed revenue opportunity. Existing cabins are basic and underutilized, and the aging ski lodge lacks insulation, plumbing, and winter accessibility, making year-round stays impractical. In the summer, Beaver Creek Park and the surrounding Bear Paw Mountains draw hikers, mountain bikers, and Tribal-licensed hunters, yet trailheads lack formal staging areas, adequate parking, signage, and visitor amenities.

Cultural experiences such as buffalo watching tours or programs led by Tribal elders are not yet available. While the annual powwow does attract visitors, awareness remains low among non-Tribal audiences due to informal scheduling and limited promotion beyond word of mouth.

Additionally, there is no local outfitter offering rentals for skis, snowshoes, fat bikes, hiking gear, or fishing equipment—further limiting visitor spending on the reservation. As a result, even the small number of tourists who do visit often spend money off-reservation, missing the opportunity to contribute to the local economy. Attracting external visitors to enjoy RBIR outdoor activities can foster local employment and tribally-owned enterprises for existing and new entrepreneurs.

Stopover potential is also constrained by a lack of visitor information, signage, and essential services. Wayfinding signage within the reservation is currently non-existent. There are strong opportunities to improve signage, introduce shuttle connections to key attractions like the Ski Bowl, and develop packaged itineraries that link Rocky Boy with regional sites such as the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls and the Buffalo Jump in Havre. These improvements would allow Rocky Boy's to capture a greater share of highway-driven tourism and fulfill its potential as a distinctive cultural-adventure destination.

6.5.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

Integrated Gear & Guide Center

- Allocate a 400 ft^2 space within the Community Commons Node to establish a gear and guide center as an entrepreneurial business opportunity. The facility would offer a range of essential visitor services, including a retail and rental outlet with winter gear (e.g., skis, snowshoes, fat bikes) and summer equipment (e.g., hiking packs, fishing rods, tents), along with a Tribal licensing service. A pop-up rental trailer can serve this function during the interim period until the permanent facility is constructed.
- Pursue partnerships with experienced businesses that have a proven track record in marketing and delivering outdoor tourism experiences. These operators can run guided tours on the Reservation under a revenue-sharing agreement with RBIR.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

Year-Round Lodging & Cultural Retreat

Cabin Upgrades: Improve and winterize existing cabins: install insulation, wood stoves, composting toilets to support off-season occupancy.

- **Tipi Village:** Develop ten elevated Tipis with a shared bathhouse, fire-pit circle, and cultural-demo tent, operating spring through fall.
- **Location:** Tribe to advise a remote (offering serene scenery), yet accessible location connected to Route 6.

Seasonal Programming & Shuttle Links

- Extend the Route 6 circulator shuttle to key attractions on weekends, thereby generating income to the Tribe from outside visitors. Coordinate with the Lewis & Clark Interpretive Center in Great Falls and Havre Buffalo Jump for packaged excursions. Contract Tribal guides to lead snowshoe treks, fat-bike tours, horseback rides, and cultural hikes; publish a year-round activity calendar and build packaged itineraries.

Trailhead & Signage Network

- Prepare light parking/staging areas at Beaver Creek, Flow-Trail, and Ski Bowl trailheads. Install twelve branded wayfinding pylons along Route 6/ US 87 and interactive kiosks with QR-code maps and booking links for gear rental and tours (these have been costed above).

Regional Partnerships & Marketing

- Co-market "Lewis & Clark → Rocky Boy Indian Reservation" heritage-adventure packages with the Great Falls Conventions and Visitors Bureau and Interpretive Center. Collaborate with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to bundle Tribal-licensed hunt permits with gear-rental packages. Offer "Rocky Boy Overnight" stop-over incentives to travelers on US 87 between Havre, Great Falls, and Glacier.

6.5.4 Key Elements of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- **Cabin Winterization:** Insulation, stoves, and composting toilets
- **Pop-Up Rental Trailer:** Trailer fit-out, gear purchase, staffing for winter weekends
- **Wayfinding Rollout:** Five directional and wayfinding signs
- **Appoint Interim Tourism Coordinator:** Designate a part-time or interim coordinator within an existing Tribal department to begin tourism planning, coordination, and outreach activities; develop initial work plan, budget, and partnership agreements to support the transition to a fully operational Tourism Office.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

- **Ski-Bowl Lodge Retrofit:** Structural upgrades, 15-room build-out, café, story hall
- **Gear & Guide Hub Build-Out:** Complete 1,500 ft^2 outfitter center with secure storage, training
- **Trail & Flow-Trail Network:** Develop 10 mi marked hiking trails and fat-bike loops
- **Regional Tour Package Development:** Marketing collateral, web integration, partner co-op fees
- **Develop Tipi Village:** Purchase tents and prepare site; train local community members on developing culinary and cultural experiences connected with Tipi rentals; allocate management to a Tribal business.
- **Establish RV Park:** Prepare 15 RV/tent pads and associated amenities accessible from a paved road
- **Establish Tourism Office:** Create and staff a Tribal Tourism Office to oversee planning, coordination, marketing, and community engagement for tourism development; equip the office with basic furnishings, technology, and start-up operational resources.

6.5.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

Table 6-12: Outdoor Recreation & Lodging Node Capital and Infrastructure Cost Estimates

Component	Line Items & Assumptions	Estimated Cost
Integrated Gear & Guide Center	This can be part of the community commons project and be located there and the space offered for an entrepreneurial venture to operate it, therefore there would be no cost to the Tribe.	None
Tipi Village	10 elevated Tipis (platform + tent) @ $3K each = $30K Shared bathhouse (4 bathrooms + showers) = $50K Fire-pit circle, paths, demo tent = $50K	$130K
RV Park	15 pads: site grading & pads @ $3 K/pad = $45K; Water/electric/ sewer hookups @ $5 K/pad = $75K	$120K
Ski Bowl Cabins Retrofit	Retrofit shell of 8 cabins @ $15 K/cabin = $120K Other costs (permits, minor repairs) = $20K	$140K
Prepare Hiking Trails	Prepare three hiking trails by engaging local volunteers with expertise in RBIR topography and hiking trails potential. Approximate materials (to be verified by RBIR) for three trails of around 4 miles each: 636 trail markers, 6 major signs (trailheads and maps), 24 directional arrows, and reflective paint for blazes. Materials should be weather-resistant.	$30,000
TOTAL		**~$420K**

More details on the key elements of this node, including proposed financing approaches, are provided below.

Integrated Gear & Guide Center

- **Model:** Anchor a cooperative "outfitter hub" where individual Tribal entrepreneurs lease dedicated bays to operate complementary services (ski/snowshoe rental, fat-bike rental, fishing-guide bookings) under a unified Tribal brand.
- **Estimated Investment:** The bulk of the cost can be part of the community commons project, if located there. Independent premises will require an additional capital expenditure.
- **Financing:** The Tribe to cover build-out costs with one or a combination of the following options: its own funds, a USDA Rural Business Development grant (up to $200 K), low-interest CDFI loans for the co-op entity, or external joint venture investment. Entrepreneurs could access microloans (0 %–2 % interest) from a Tribal CDFI facility to purchase gear inventory.
- **Suggested Model:** Tribal co-op governance ensures revenue pooling for maintenance, while individual operators retain price autonomy and build small business credit.

Tipi Village & RV Park

- **Model:** A Tribal hospitality co-op manages site infrastructure (platforms, bathhouse, utilities) and subleases Tipis/RV pads to either:
  1. Tribal entrepreneurs who package lodging with cultural or culinary experiences;
  2. An established glamping operator under a revenue-share agreement (e.g., 50 % to Tribe, 50 % to operator).

Co-management with an experienced glamping partner accelerates market entry and leverages proven booking systems, while Tribal vendors deliver on-site programming.

- **Financing:** Consider pursuing a First Peoples Fund cultural-tourism grant (~$150K), a Walton Family Foundation rural tourism award (~$100 K), and a CDFI-backed term loan (pending business plan formulation).

Cabin Upgrades

- **Model:** Tribe retains ownership; Tribal construction cooperatives or small contractors execute winterization improvements, then rent cabins through a single booking platform and on established online tour operators, such as Booking.com.

  Centralized management by the Tribal Tourism Office, which has been created but not consistently staffed, would ensure consistent quality and pricing, while also providing additional employment for Tribal members.

- **Financing:** Tribal General Fund seed allocation to cover insulation and utilities; possibly supplemented by a BIA Tribal Tourism grant (~$100 K).

Ski-Bowl Lodge Development

- **Model:** Public–private partnership: Tribe contributes the land and core shell; a hospitality developer invests in guest-room fit-outs and café build-out in exchange for a 50/50 net-revenue share (Tribe/partner), that can be revised after a five-year operating period, or the property reverts fully to the Tribe for a different management structure. The developer brings partial capital, operational expertise and brand recognition, while the Tribe benefits from guaranteed lease payments and a share of upside revenue.

- **Financing:** Solicit investor to invest and operate on a profit sharing arrangement with RBIR.

6.5.6 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

Below are examples demonstrating how small-to-midsize Tribes leverage limited membership through targeted tourism and lodging enterprises, combining cultural interpretation with outdoor adventure to generate substantial local employment, diversify revenues, and retain visitation spending on tribal lands.

1. Hualapai Tribe (AZ; ~2,300 members)

Enterprise
Grand Canyon West & Hualapai River Runners

Scale & Impact
Operates Grand Canyon West (Skywalk, zip line, helicopter tours) and is the only tribal-owned outfitter licensed to run Colorado River rafting in the western Grand Canyon. These ventures generate tens of millions in annual revenue and support over 300 jobs, many held by tribal members.

Features

- Full-day guided rafting tours through the canyon
- Glass-bottom Skywalk over 4,000 ft above the canyon floor
- Helicopter and zipline tours
- Cultural interpretive presentations and traditional dwellings

Funding and Sustainability
Fully tribal operated; revenue funds tribal services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Profits support environmental stewardship, workforce development, and cultural programming.

Reference: https://grandcanyonwest.com/

Photo courtesy of Ibrahim Osta

2. Havasupai Tribe (AZ; ~730 members)

Enterprise
Havasupai Lodge, Campground & Tourism Permits

Scale & Impact
Manages access to Havasu Canyon and Supai Village for approximately 25,000–40,000 visitors annually, operating the lodge, campground, café, and visitor permitting system. Tribal members staff all operations, generating critical economic income.

Features
- Permit-based backpacking access to Supai Village and waterfalls
- Tribal-run rustic lodge and campground
- Local café, convenience store, and cultural visitor interactions

Funding and Sustainability
Fully tribal owned and operated; tourism revenue sustains village services, reservation facilities, and cultural heritage preservation.

Reference: https://www.theofficialhavasupaitribe.com

3. Eastern Shoshone & Northern Arapaho Tribes (WY; ~16,000 combined)

Enterprise
Wind River Canyon Whitewater & Fly Fishing

Scale & Impact
Runs Wind River Canyon Whitewater & Fly Fishing, a 100% Native American owned outfitter, exclusively permitted by both tribes to offer guided whitewater rafting and fly-fishing trips through the scenic Wind River Canyon. Operating since 1992, it generates tourism income, employment for tribal guides, and stewardship funding.

Features
- Rafting trips through Wind River Canyon with scenic rapids
- Guided fly-fishing trips targeting wild trout
- Interpretive guidance on tribal history and conservation practices

Funding and Sustainability
Fully tribal-permitted and locally operated; profits support tribal fisheries, conservation, guide training, and cultural programming.

Reference: https://www.windrivercanyon.com/

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

6.6 Food Sovereignty Node

On Route 6

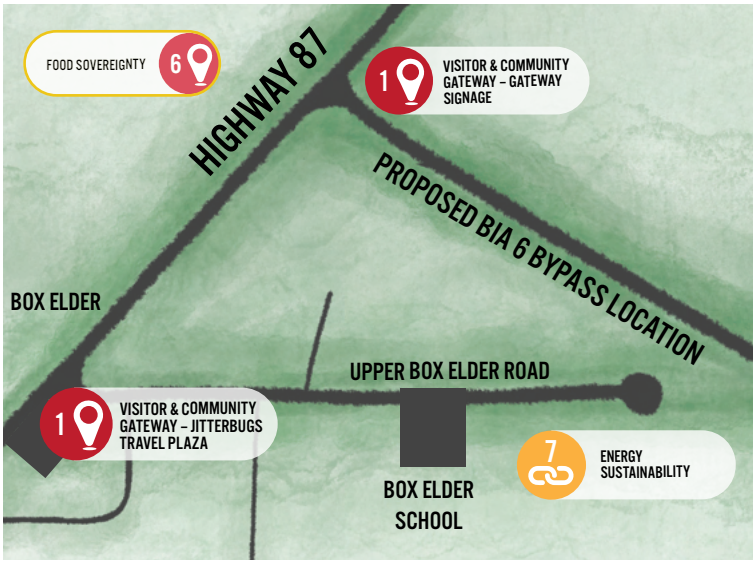
Location
Adjacent to the rail spur, east of the Buffalo Child Ranch entrance

Corridor Classification
Linked to Route 6, located just off the corridor but relies on Route 6 for access, visibility, and customer flow. While not directly on the highway, its success is closely tied to connectivity with the corridor through signage, transit links, or turnoffs.

Purpose
Support Tribal food sovereignty, anchor on-reservation food systems by providing USDA-certified bison and beef processing, value-added food production, and cold storage.

Potential Community Champions
Buffalo Child Ranch management, Rocky Boy Garden Club, Rocky Boy's Planning Department, local ranchers and producers.

Investment Estimate
$2.75 million



6.6.1 Description

This node leverages its proximity to the Buffalo Child Ranch and adjacency to the rail spur to maximize the value of locally produced livestock and crops. It also presents an opportunity to serve nearby ranches that may utilize the proposed RBIR harvesting facility for a fee, generating additional revenue.

Anchored by a 2,000 ft^2 USDA-inspected meat locker, the facility will allow Tribal ranchers to expand the bison herd, process meat on-site—eliminating the need for off-reservation transport—and supply fresh cuts to schools, camps, and local markets. Future phases could include the production of value-added products such as smoked meats and jerky.

In parallel, the installation of three 6,000 ft^2 greenhouses, complemented by ten high-tunnels and a pilot aquaponics system, will support year-round vegetable and specialty crop cultivation. This integrated approach to livestock and produce production enhances food sovereignty, creates jobs, and supports greater economic self-sufficiency for the community.

6.6.2 Current Activities and Gaps to be Filled

The Tribe currently operates a mobile harvesting unit and maintains a core herd of approximately 40 bison, which are processed in a temporary facility. A small, uninspected locker room handles direct-sale cuts for local customers and Tribal events; however, it lacks USDA certification, preventing access to broader wholesale or institutional markets. Market demand suggests clear opportunities to expand production and attract off-reservation ranchers to utilize the facility for a fee paid to the Tribe.

In parallel, the Rocky Boy Garden Club has been training community members in home-scale production, signaling strong local interest in year-round specialty crops. However, expansion is limited by the lack of climate-controlled greenhouse space, shared-use processing equipment, and post-harvest storage. Without walk-in coolers or freezers, perishable produce must be transported off-reservation for cold storage—cutting into margins and complicating logistics.

The currently unused rail spur represents an additional untapped asset. If activated, it could provide low-cost, bulk shipping options for both meat and agricultural products, particularly if the Tribe succeeds in attracting off-reservation producers. In its current dormant state, the rail spur limits access to external markets such as Havre, Great Falls, and beyond.

Until these infrastructure and logistical challenges are addressed—including USDA certification, cold storage, and reliable shipping—the Tribe will be unable to fully realize the economic potential of its livestock, specialty crop initiatives, and shared-use facilities.

6.6.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

Facility Development & Land Use

- Construct a 2,500 ft² USDA-inspected meat processing building with cut-and-wrap room, packaging line, and retail storefront adjacent to the rail spur.
- Expand with a 6,000 ft² light-industrial bay configured for smoking, jerky curing, and specialty packaging.
- Install three 6,000 ft² controlled-environment greenhouses (each with four high-tunnels and an aquaponics module) to enable year-round vegetable and herb production.

Partnerships & Technical Assistance

- Partner with Fort Belknap's SBDC to secure mobile processing expertise and co-train tribal butchers in USDA protocols.
- Engage Montana State University Extension for greenhouse management training and crop variety trials suited to northern climates.
- Investigate the viability of negotiating a use agreement with the BNSF rail division to activate the spur for weekly (or other frequency determined by production capacity) carload shipments of packaged meat and bulk produce.

Governance & Permitting

- Adopt a streamlined "Meat & Agribusiness Permit" under the HEARTH Act master-lease process to expedite facility approvals.
- Form a Tribal Agribusiness Council, including ranchers, Garden Club members, and economic-development staff, to oversee quality standards and shared-use scheduling.

Business Models & Finance

- Connect outbound rail shipments to wholesale buyers in Havre, Great Falls, and beyond. Collaborate with Fort Belknap on market expansion.
- Secure sales agreements with the RBIR School District cafeterias, regional camp providers, and Tribal events to guarantee initial purchase volumes.
- Host quarterly "Meat & Market Days" at the Node to introduce wholesale buyers and chefs to Tribal-produced products.
- Launch a cooperative ownership model for the processing facility, selling equity shares to out of Tribe ranchers and producers to generate startup capital in exchange for processing credits.
- Investigate the possibility of seeding a revolving Agribusiness Loan Fund capitalized via USDA Rural Cooperative Development grants to finance greenhouse construction and working capital.
- Offer tiered usage fees for meat processing, cold storage, and greenhouse bays, with discounted rates for Tribal-owned operations.
- Integrate with the Community Commons parcel lockers for direct-to-consumer sales and
- Brand Rocky Boy bison meat by capitalizing on its healthy characteristics to generate high returns from premium-priced products.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

6.6.4 Key Elements of Implementation

Short-Term Actions (1-2 Years)

- **Seed Herd Expansion Fund:** Allocate Tribal or grant funds to acquire an additional 20–30 bison, increasing the productive herd from 40 to at least 60 animals. This upfront investment will ensure sufficient throughput for pilot processing days.
- **Deploy Temporary Cold Storage:** Lease one or two 20' refrigerated shipping containers to provide immediate walk-in cooler/freezer capacity for bison and specialty crops.
- **Pilot On-Site Processing Days:** Schedule monthly "Bison Processing Demo Days" using the Tribe's mobile harvest unit on the future Food Sovereignty Node parcel. Invite off-reservation farmers to book slots and pay a processing fee, building early revenue and operational learning.
- **Greenhouse Pop-Up Demonstration:** Erect a 1,200 ft^2 greenhouse adjacent to the Buffalo Ranch to trial year-round vegetable production under MSU Extension guidance.
- **Rail Spur Activation Study:** Invest in a study of a service-agreement and rate negotiation with BNSF to enable weekly box-car shipments, and map out site access and loading-dock requirements.

Long-Term Actions (3+ Years)

- **Scale Herd to Commercial Size:** Invest in breeding infrastructure and genetics support to grow the herd to 150–200 bison over three years, aligning production volumes with processing capacity.
- **Construct USDA-Certified Processing Facility:** Build a permanent 2,500 ft^2 meat processing plant with kill floor, cut-and-wrap room, packaging line, and retail storefront—directly tied into the activated rail spur for bulk outbound shipments.
- **Expand Value-Added Bays:** Add a 6,000 ft^2 light-industrial annex outfitted for smoking, jerky curing, and specialty packaging, complete with HACCP-compliant equipment.
- **Install Controlled-Environment Agriculture Complex:** Develop three 6,000 ft^2 greenhouses (with high-tunnels and an aquaponics module) to support scaled year-round vegetable, herb, and specialty-crop production.
- **Institutionalize Sales Agreements:** Secure multi-year purchase contracts with the RBIR School District and regional retails for guaranteed volumes of fresh cuts, smoked meats, and greenhouse produce.
- **Accredit Butchery & Ranching Certification:** Partner with MSU Extension and Fort Belknap SBDC to develop accredited bison husbandry and butchery training programs, embedding workforce pathways that support both herd expansion and facility operations.

6.6.5 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

Table 6-13: Food Sovereignty Node Facilities Cost Estimates

Line Item	Qty / Area	Unit Cost	Cost Estimate ($ in Thousands / Millions)
Meat processing building	2,500 sq ft @ $400 / sq ft	$400 / sq ft	$1 M
Light-industrial bay (smokehouse, jerky curing)	3,000 sq ft @ $175 / sq ft	$175 / sq ft	$525K
High-tunnel greenhouses (3 × 2,000 sq ft)	6,000 sq ft total @ $50 / sq ft	$50 / sq ft	$300K
Walk-in coolers & freezer units	2 units	$100 K each	$200K
Processing & packaging equipment	lump sum	–	$400K
Site work (grading, foundations, access)	lump sum	–	$150K
Utilities (water, sewer, power)	lump sum	–	$200K
TOTAL			**$2.75M**

Potential financing options are listed below.

- **Public–Private Partnerships:** Lease agreements with regional meat processors or cold-storage operators to underwrite build-out costs.
- **Equity shares:** In order to generate external funds, the Tribe can sell equity shares to out of Tribe ranchers and producers to generate startup capital in exchange for processing credits.

6.6.6 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

Each of the facilities highlighted below illustrates how investment in dedicated processing infrastructure—paired with culturally aligned training and blended funding—can strengthen local food systems, retain value within Tribal economies, and advance food sovereignty.

1. Cheyenne River Buffalo Authority Corporation (Cheyenne River Reservation, SD)

Size

~3,200 sq ft USDA-certified facility

Highlights

- On-site harvest training program
- Processes over 1,200 head annually for a Tribal cooperative

Features

Integrates hands-on apprentice training, in partnership with local tech schools, with commercial-scale processing lines, cutting rooms, and blast freezers. Products are branded and sold through the Tribe's Buffalo Authority cooperative, reinforcing local supply chains and workforce development.

Funding and Sustainability

Built with Tribal Transit Program Set-Aside (5311(c)) funds and philanthropic grants. Revenues from processing fees and cooperative sales cover operating costs. Ongoing workforce development is supported by a revolving micro-loan fund managed by the Tribal Buffalo Authority.

2. Oglala Sioux Tribe Agribusiness Hub (Pine Ridge Reservation, SD)

Size

~4 acre complex

Highlights

- High-tunnel greenhouses, commercial kitchen, micro-dairy processing
- Partnership with regional CDFI for expansion financing

Features

A multi-use campus housing climate-controlled greenhouses, value-added food production lines (cheese, yogurt), a shared commercial kitchen, and demonstration gardens. Community members receive training in agribusiness skills, food safety, and entrepreneurship.

Funding and Sustainability

Master planning funded by a Bush Foundation Community Innovation Grant. Capital build-out financed through a Native CDFI loan, USDA Rural Development grants, and tribal contributions. Facility revenues from kitchen rentals, greenhouse leases, and dairy product sales sustain operations.

3. Navajo Nation Livestock & Meat Processing Facility (Crownpoint, NM)

Size

~2,500 sq ft meat plant

Highlights

- Co-owned by Navajo Nation and private operator
- USDA-inspected lines with processing and retail counter

Features

Combines a full-service harvesting floor, cutting room, and retail counter under one roof. The facility sources Navajo-raised livestock, provides value-added meat products, and offers small-lot custom processing.

Funding and Sustainability

Constructed through a USDA Rural Cooperative Development Grant and Navajo Nation matching funds. Joint revenues from custom processing fees and retail sales cover operational costs. Collaboration with the Navajo Nation's Division of Economic Development ensures market access and workforce training.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

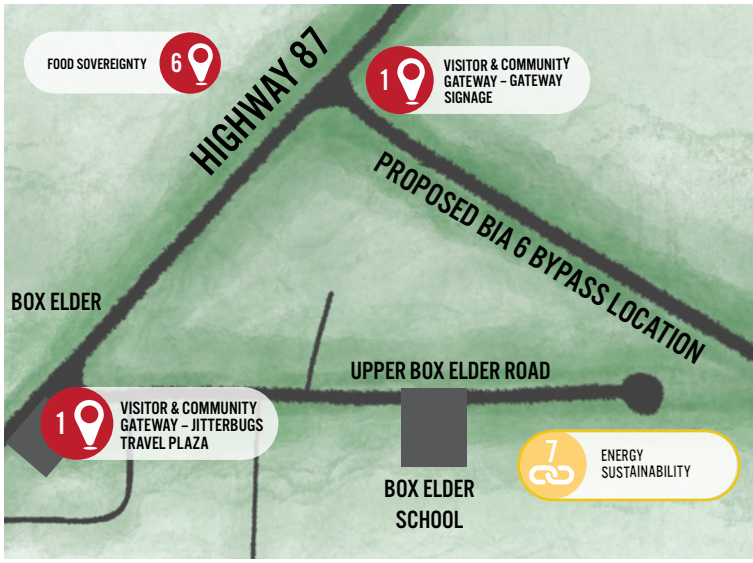
6.7 Energy Sustainability Node

Linked to Route 6

Location

Adjacent to the existing Box Elder School.

- Gateway Campus (MP 0): 1 MW PV + 2 MWh battery microgrid demonstration
- Manufacturing Node (MP 5): Agrivoltaic arrays over slaughter facility and adjacent structures' roofs
- Community Commons Node (MP 3–4): 500 kW rooftop/carport installations



Corridor Classification

Linked To Route 6 – energy systems would be located near Route 6 to service high energy consuming buildings.

Purpose

Generate ≥25% of corridor power on-site, island critical loads, seed Tribal utility governance, and train local technicians.

Potential Community Champions

Chippewa Cree Energy Corp; Stone Child College; Tribal Utility Task Force; Natural Resources & Environment Dept.

Investment Estimate

$1.57 Million

6.7.1 Description

This node will serve as the backbone of RBIR's energy sovereignty strategy by integrating clean power generation and storage with key development nodes along Route 6—including the Civic, Manufacturing, and Gateway nodes. The proposed system features a 1 MW solar array paired with a 2 MWh battery microgrid, enabling critical facilities—such as the health clinic, grocery hub, and transit center— to operate independently during outages. This "islanding" capability enhances community resilience while reducing dependence on external utilities.

Financially, the solar array is projected to generate approximately 1.4 GWh annually. At Montana's average commercial electricity rate of $0.1097/kWh, this translates to an estimated $153,580 in avoided energy costs each year. Offsetting just 25% of the estimated 5.6 GWh corridor demand would result in annual savings of roughly $38,400—helping stabilize utility expenses and redirect Tribal revenues to other priority areas.

Beyond cost savings and resilience, the initiative will also create local green jobs. Stone Child College's solar installation and electrical training programs will directly feed into system operations and maintenance, supporting 10–15 paid apprenticeships annually. The microgrid's public-facing features—including real-time performance dashboards and site tours—will visibly demonstrate Tribal leadership in critical infrastructure management. This visibility lays the foundation for establishing a Tribal Utility Authority with the capacity to negotiate power purchase agreements and set local energy rates.

Reducing Utility Costs Via Solar

A 1 MW solar array can generate approximately 1.4 GWh of electricity per year; at Montana's average commercial retail rate of $0.1097 per kWh, this equates to roughly $153,580 in avoided energy purchases annually. By offsetting a quarter of the corridor's estimated 5.6 GWh annual demand, the Tribe would realize about $38,400 in yearly savings on utility bills, stabilize rates for residents and businesses, and free up Tribal funds for other priorities.

Source: https://www.eia.gov/electricity/state/montana

6.7.2 Current Activities and Gaps to Be Filled

To date, the Tribe has partnered in a federal solar workforce initiative, certifying Tribal members and placing several in regional solar roles. Sun Spirit Solar has installed small rooftop PV systems on private homes and at Stone Child College. However, larger utility-scale arrays remain stalled by Bureau of Indian Affairs approval delays and undersized electrical feeders along Route 6, which cannot support high-capacity generation. In the absence of any community-scale battery storage or microgrid demonstration site, the corridor remains dependent on external power, and the Tribal Utility Authority is still in the feasibility study phase. Without coordinated land-use approvals, feeder upgrades, and formal governance frameworks, the Tribe cannot access major federal incentives nor guarantee reliable, low-cost power for its emerging economic nodes.

6.7.3 Opportunities & Recommendations

The following opportunities and recommendations outline a phased strategy to advance Tribal energy sovereignty through solar and microgrid deployment, while strengthening workforce development, resilience, and governance across key Route 6 nodes.

- **1 MW PV + 2 MWh Microgrid at Gateway Campus:** Build the pilot microgrid to power interpretive center, EV chargers, and adjacent hubs; island during outages and demonstrate resilience.
- **Agrivoltaics at Manufacturing Node:** Mount panels above greenhouse roofs (MP 5), optimizing crop light and PV yield.
- **Community-Scale Solar at Civic Node:** Install 500 kW rooftop/carport arrays; share excess midday power with adjacent facilities.
- **Microgrid Roll-Out:** Upon Gateway success, replicate 500 kW + 1 MWh systems at Agency and Parker School clusters under standardized equipment and permit templates.
- **Workforce Apprenticeships:** Formalize O&M practicum with Stone Child College, embedding 20 hours/week of microgrid monitoring into the curriculum. This can lead to off reservation jobs for Tribal youth.
- **Policy & Governance:** Align solar sites with HEARTH-Act master leases to expedite BIA approvals; draft Utility Authority bylaws enabling PPAs and rate setting.

6.7.4 Preliminary Cost Estimates and Financing Options

Table 6-14: Energy Sovereignty Pilot Cost Estimate

Line Item	Qty	Unit Cost	Estimated Cost ($ in Thousands)
PV array	0.5 MW @ $1.2 M / MW	$1.2 M / MW	$600K
Battery storage	1,000 kWh @ $500 / kWh	$500 / kWh	$500K
Inverters & control systems	lump sum	–	$150K
Site prep & foundations	lump sum	–	$100K
Interconnection & switchgear	lump sum	–	$120K
Soft costs (engineering, permitting)	lump sum	–	$100K
TOTAL			**$1.57 million**

To support implementation of the proposed clean energy initiatives, the Tribe can pursue a mix of financing mechanisms that leverage external partnerships, minimize upfront costs, and align with long-term sustainability goals. Potential financing options include:

- **Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs):** Negotiate 20-year agreements with Hill County Electric to attract third-party developers.
- **Tribal Bonds**: Issue $1 M in revenue bonds backed by microgrid savings and community-solar subscriptions.
- **CDFI Loans:** Secure $50 K–$250 K low-interest term loans from Native CDFIs for equipment and site prep.
- **Philanthropy:** Solar Foundation grants ($50 K–$100 K) and clean-energy donations.

6.7.5 Examples from Other Tribal Nations

These case studies show how medium- and small-scale solar projects—supported by federal grants, CDFI financing, and net-metering policies—can deliver reliable revenue streams, lower utility costs, and build tribal capacity in renewable energy.

To unlock the full potential of the seven proposed economic development nodes, the Tribe should consider taking deliberate steps to organize internally—building the staffing, systems, and institutional capacity required to engage with external investors and partners. While Section 6 of this report outlines tailored financing options for each node, this section presents a broader strategy for positioning Rocky Boy's as a destination for investment and entrepreneurship.

1. Oglala Sioux Tribe (SD; ≈4,300 members)

Project
2 MW Community Solar Array

Highlights
- Funded through U.S. DOE Renewable Resource Grants & Loans (RRGL) program
- Installed a ground-mounted, 2 MW PV system adjacent to tribal housing
- Net metering agreement with local utility

Features
Combines a full-service harvesting floor, cutting room, and retail counter under one roof. The facility sources Navajo-raised livestock, provides value-added meat products, and offers small-lot custom processing.

Funding and Sustainability
DOE RRGL grant covered 50 % of capital costs; the Tribe provided matching funds. Ongoing O&M is budgeted from annual solar-credit revenues, with surplus reinvested in elder housing weatherization.

Learn more: https://oglalalakotanation.org/programs/energy/solar

2. Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa (ND; ≈10,000 members)

Project
1.2 MW solar project (solar panel on roofs, solar lighting, etc.)

Highlights
- Financed via USDA REAP grants and Native-focused CDFI loans
- Supplies renewable power to the Tribe's community center and tribal offices
- Achieved a 40 % reduction in peak load charges

Features
A tracker-mounted array that maximizes generation year-round. Excess generation is credited back to the Tribe under North Dakota's net-metering policy. Local hires were prioritized for construction and operations.

Funding and Sustainability
USDA REAP grant covered 25 % of project; the rest financed through a Native CDFI term loan. Annual energy-cost savings cover debt service, with net income directed to the Tribe's general fund.

3. Round Valley Tribe (CA; ≈1,600 members)

Project
100 kW Rooftop PV + 200 kWh Battery Storage

Highlights
- Installed on the Tribal Community Center under DOE Tribal Energy Program grants
- Functions as an apprenticeship and training site for tribal youth
- Provides backup power during grid outages

Features
Rooftop arrays paired with lithium-ion storage to smooth load and enable islanding. Hands-on training curriculum developed in partnership with a regional technical college.

Funding and Sustainability
DOE Tribal Energy grant covered 75 % of system costs; the Tribe contributed site prep and interconnection fees. Energy savings reduce the Community Center's electric bill by 60 %, and training program fees help fund ongoing battery maintenance.

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

7

Engaging External Investors

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

7.1 Strengthening Internal Capacity

In order to attract, grow, and manage outside investment, the Tribe might consider establishing an initial Investment Facilitation Desk that can, over time, evolve into a full Trade and Investment Development Services Office. This desk—and eventually, the office—would coordinate investment readiness efforts, manage investor relationships, and align Tribal development priorities with available funding opportunities. This team could serve as the centralized hub for marketing, prospect development, joint-venture facilitation, and engaging enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation—ensuring consistency, transparency, and strategic alignment across all investment activities.

One potential implementation strategy is to launch the office in phases—beginning with the creation of an Investment Facilitation Desk that can evolve over time into a full Trade and Investment Development Services Office, housed within the proposed Entrepreneurship & Innovation Node. In its initial phase, staff at the Investment Facilitation Desk could dedicate several hours per week to investor outreach, due diligence support, and facilitating introductions to SBDC and CDFI advisors. As the desk evolves into a full office, in-kind space and pro bono advisory hours can continue to help minimize operating costs and support the growth of investment-related services.

By consolidating these efforts under a centralized investment promotion function, the Tribe will be better equipped to mobilize resources, manage investor relationships, and catalyze the economic transformation envisioned for the Route 6 corridor and beyond.

7.2 Overarching Investment Promotion Strategies

7.2.1 Stand-Alone External Investors

Rocky Boy can attract stand-alone investors by leveraging its unique assets—such as long-term affordable land leases, access to Highway 2 logistics, and eligibility for federal tax credits. Rather than relying on cash subsidies, the Tribe can emphasize its value proposition through low-cost leases and investment-ready documentation.

Initial steps:

- Develop a professionally designed prospectus
- Prepare pre-approved zoning letters to demonstrate readiness

In-kind support: Planning Department interns and Buffalo Rock Communications

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

7.2.2 Joint Venture Partnerships

The Tribe can partner with external firms through 49/51 joint ventures that enhance social license, retain majority Tribal control, and qualify as Native enterprises for federal procurement. A loan-loss reserve can reduce risk for equity partners without requiring direct subsidies.

Initial steps:

- Develop standardized legal and financial JV templates
- Host matchmaking events

In-kind support: Templates from MT Tribal Enterprise Consortium; risk modeling by Stone Child College students

7.2.3 Chippewa Cree Investors: Enrolled Members Living Off the Reservation

Engaging enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation through a "Heritage Share" program allows members to invest in their homeland through pooled funds that generate community impact and potential dividends.

Next steps:

- Launch digital campaign with quarterly webinars and updates
- Manage engagement through Enrollment Office and Entrepreneurship and Innovation Node

In-kind support: Email and Zoom hosting through Stone Child College

7.2.4 Route 6 Development Fund (R6-Fund)

Establish a $5M evergreen fund using a mix of SSBCI capital, in-kind land contributions, and investment from enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation. The fund can provide equity and revenue-sharing capital for Route 6 projects.

Next steps:

- Develop legal frameworks and fund structure
- Align with Tribal project priorities

In-kind support: Legal templates from NAFOA; modeling by Stone Child College analysts

> *"Route 6 carries our families, our workers, and our future. It's not just about infrastructure and economic development; it's about creating a healthy and sustainable community for generations to come."*
>
> **Curtis Monteau Jr.**
> Transportation Director

7.2.5 Convertible Note Campaign: Enrolled Members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe Living Off the Reservation

The Tribe can offer 5-year notes to enrolled members of the Chippewa Cree Tribe living off the Reservation at a modest interest rate (e.g., 3%) with an option to convert to equity in the R6-Fund.

Next steps:

- Create a digital marketing and onboarding campaign
- Launch a secure investor portal on the Tribal website

In-kind support: Campaign design by interns; hosted on Tribal web platform

7.2.6 Impact-Ready Certification

Partnering with organizations like GIIN/IRIS+ can allow Rocky Boy to pre-score investment projects using Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) metrics—enhancing investor confidence and streamlining due diligence.

Next steps:

- Train volunteer analysts and integrate IRIS+ tools
- Apply ESG standards to early-stage Route 6 venture

In-kind support: Student analysts and pro bono training

7.2.7 Tribal Council–Backed Investment Assurance Pilot

To help reduce perceived risk for early-stage investors, the Tribe could explore a Council-approved investment assurance mechanism that provisionally covers up to 10% of initial investment principals in select ventures. This tool would be carefully structured to protect Tribal interests and maintain full decision-making authority.

Next steps:

- Define legal structure, risk limits, and oversight protocols for the assurance mechanism
- Pilot with a small number of vetted Route 6 ventures

Explore potential exchange with the MT Tribal Enterprise Consortium to learn more about the framework they have developed.

Workforce development is a critical cross-cutting theme underpinning all seven Route 6 economic development nodes. From construction and clean energy to cultural tourism and entrepreneurship, each node will require a skilled and adaptable workforce to drive long-term success. To realize this vision, the Tribe must invest in training systems, supportive services, and institutional partnerships that can prepare community members for meaningful participation in the local economy.

Photo courtesy of Ibrahim Osta

8

Workforce Development for Sustainable Growth

Photo courtesy of Javon Wing

8.1 Strategic Partners in Workforce Development

Stone Child College is proposed as a core strategic partner in advancing the Tribe's long-term workforce development strategy. The College already plays a central role in strengthening the local workforce through culturally grounded, community-driven education and training. Its academic and vocational programs align with local employment needs, offering certificates and degrees in fields such as information systems, education, and public health. In addition to academic instruction, the College collaborates with Tribal TANF and vocational rehabilitation programs to provide adult education, career counseling, and wraparound support.

As workforce needs evolve—particularly across the seven Route 6 economic development nodes—Stone Child College is well positioned to co-develop specialized training, expand apprenticeships, support entrepreneurship, and offer employer-aligned education pathways in collaboration with Tribal departments and private-sector partners.

The Chippewa Cree Health Center is also proposed as a strategic partner in workforce development, based on its recognition that healing—mental, emotional, and spiritual—is foundational to economic participation. Its approach aligns closely with the Tribe's strategic framework, which places wellness, cultural identity, and healing at the heart of sustainable development.

The Tribe's investment in the Mīyō Pimātisiwinkamik Youth Center, currently under construction, reflects this commitment. The center is designed to provide youth through age 18 with culturally grounded health care, wellness programming, and skill-building opportunities—such as wild game processing—extending the Health Center's reach beyond clinical services. Together with elder housing, professional staff residences, and recreational facilities, the Health Complex fosters an environment where well-being and opportunity are interwoven.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

The Health Center's long-term master plan, in place since 2010 and steadily implemented, demonstrates a consistent, values-driven vision that complements workforce development goals. For example, by addressing early trauma and supporting mental health in youth, the Health Center lays the foundation for educational attainment and career success—areas that Stone Child College is positioned to carry forward through higher education and job training.

Together, Stone Child College and the Chippewa Cree Health Center represent an integrated, cross-sector approach to workforce development—grounded in cultural identity, community healing, and lifelong development. Their leadership and alignment with Tribal priorities make them essential proposed partners in building a strong, healthy, and future-ready workforce.

8.2 Workforce Strategies Across the Route 6 Corridor

To meet the emerging workforce demands across all seven economic development nodes, the Tribe can implement a range of targeted workforce development strategies in partnership with Stone Child College, the Rocky Boy Health Center and other key stakeholders. These efforts must be both inclusive and forward-looking—supporting adults seeking new opportunities while also building long-term career pathways for youth.

Community feedback underscores the importance of prioritizing young people in workforce planning. There is strong interest in expanding mentorship, introducing high school students to entrepreneurship, and strengthening work-based learning partnerships with local employers. In addition, wellness and behavioral health support—especially for youth—is seen as foundational to long-term workforce readiness. Institutions like the Youth Wellness Center, Stone Child College, and the Box Elder School District offer a strong foundation for developing more coordinated and intentional pathways into employment.

8.2.1 Route 6 Skills Academy

In partnership with Stone Child College, the Tribe can offer industry-recognized credentials in construction, solar installation, and hospitality—tailored for working adults through evening and weekend formats.

- **Training Programs:**
  - NCCER (construction trades)
  - NABCEP (solar photovoltaic)
  - AHLEI (hospitality and tourism)
- **Stakeholders**: Stone Child College Continuing Ed; Tribal Workforce Development Board
- **Life Skills Component:** Teamwork modules by the Tribal Employment Rights Office
- **Partner Programs:** NCCER, NABCEP, AHLEI

8.2.2 Apprenticeship Programs

Establish paid apprenticeship programs with Buffalo Rock Communications, Chippewa Cree Construction, and local tourism employers under Montana's registered apprenticeship framework. These roles allow participants to earn wages while learning valuable skills.

- **Stakeholders:** Host employers Tribal Adult Vocational Training Program
- **Partner Program:** Montana Apprenticeship Program
- **Life Skills Component:** Financial planning workshops by the Tribal Wellness Center

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

8.2.3 Digital & Soft-Skills Bootcamps

Offer short-term, hybrid-format bootcamps that build digital fluency and workplace readiness. These can include basic coding, Microsoft Office, customer service, and project management fundamentals.

- **Stakeholders**: Stone Child College IT Department; Youth Wellness Center
- **Partner Programs:**
  - Code Academy
  - PMI Project Fundamentals
- **Life Skills Component:** Digital safety workshops by Tribal Human Services

8.2.4 Youth Pathways & Career Counseling

Integrate career into local schools and coordinate summer internships, job-shadowing, and mentorship opportunities tied to Route 6 nodes.

- **Stakeholders:** School Liaison; Youth Council; Youth Wellness Center
- **Life Skills Component:** Goal-setting workshops by Tribal Youth Services

8.2.5 Workforce Support Services

Address practical employment barriers through support systems such as in-kind childcare cooperatives, a reservation-wide vanpool, and on-site counseling services—all delivered with minimal budget impact by reallocating existing staff schedules.

- **Stakeholders:** Tribal Human Services; Youth Wellness Center; Enrollment Office
- **Partner Program:** Head Start Family Services

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

9 Conclusion

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

This economic scan outlines a clear pathway for the Chippewa Cree Tribe to build a more self-reliant and resilient economy grounded in cultural values, community priorities, and strategic infrastructure. The seven proposed economic development nodes—organized through the On, Linked to, and Enabled by Route 6 framework—highlight opportunities to recapture local spending, attract external investment, expand entrepreneurship, and prepare a ready workforce.

By aligning internal capacity, strengthening key institutions like Stone Child College and the Rocky Boy Health Center, and pursuing targeted partnerships, the Tribe can move from vision to implementation. With thoughtful coordination and sustained community engagement, these investments can lay the foundation for long-term prosperity and self-determined development for the people of the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation.

Photo courtesy of Shane Sangrey

Acknowledgement

This economic scan was co-created through close collaboration with the Chippewa Cree Tribe and its community members. We approached the work with care and respect—spending time on the ground, listening closely, and learning from the insights shared with us. Community members welcomed us with openness and honesty, and their input shaped the direction and focus of this effort.

Our team learned a great deal through this process, and we carry that learning with us. The result reflects a shared commitment to thoughtful, intentional planning, and we are deeply grateful for the opportunity to have contributed to this work in partnership with the community.

Thank you to our team:

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Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
AADT	Average Annual Daily Traffic / Annual Average Daily Traffic
ACS	American Community Survey
ACCT	Association for Challenge Course Technology
ACI	American Concrete Institute
ADR	Average Daily Rate (lodging)
AMGA	American Mountain Guides Association
ATG	Automatic Tank Gauging
ATR	Automatic Traffic Recorder
BEAD	Broadband Equity, Access & Deployment
BIA	Bureau of Indian Affairs
BUILD	Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development
CCI	Construction Cost Index
CCT	Chippewa Cree Tribe of Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation
CEDS	Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy
CEA	Controlled Environment Agriculture
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
C-store	Convenience Store
CSA	Community Supported Agriculture
DEF	Diesel Exhaust Fluid
DEQ	Department of Environmental Quality (Montana DEQ)
DOE	United States Department of Energy
DOT	United States Department of Transportation
DSCR	Debt Service Coverage Ratio / Debt-Service Coverage Ratio
EDA	Economic Development Administration
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
FTA	Federal Transit Administration
FTE	Full-Time Equivalent
GIIN	Global Impact Investing Network
GIS	Geographic Information System
GM	Gross Margin
HACCP	Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points
HEARTH	Helping Expedite & Advance Responsible Tribal Homeownership Act
HUD	United States Department of Housing & Urban Development
ICDBG	Indian Community Development Block Grant
IRIS+	Impact Reporting & Investment Standards Plus

Acronyms

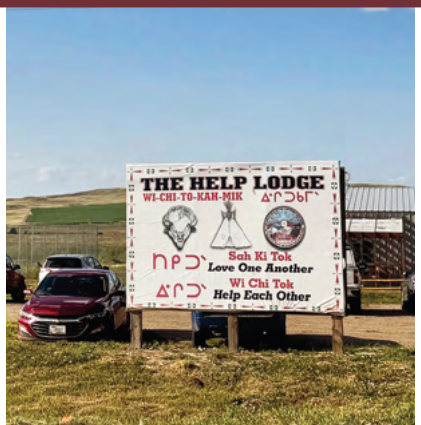
Acronym	Definition
IRR	Internal Rate of Return
JV	Joint Venture
JA	Junior Achievement
LFP	Lithium Iron Phosphate
LTV	Loan-to-Value
MDT	Montana Department of Transportation
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
NABCEP	North American Board of Certified Energy Practitioners
NACS	National Association of Convenience Stores
NCCER	National Center for Construction Education & Research
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NTIA	National Telecommunications & Information Administration
OPIS	Oil Price Information Service
PPA	Power Purchase Agreement
PV	Photovoltaic
R6Fund	Route 6 Development Fund
RAISE	Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity
RBIR	Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation
RFP	Request for Proposal
ROW	Right-of-Way
RRGL	Renewable Resource Grant & Loan
SG&A	Selling, General & Administrative expenses
SSBCI	State Small Business Credit Initiative
SSURGO	Soil Survey Geographic Database
SWPPP	Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plan
TERO	Tribal Employment Rights Office
THPO	Tribal Historic Preservation Office
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USFS	United States Forest Service
US 87	United States Highway 87
UST	Underground Storage Tank
VPD	Vehicles per Day
WB-62	AASHTO design vehicle "WB-62" (truck turning template)
WFR	Wilderness First Responder

Back Cover photos courtesy of Water Environmental Technologies, Ibrahim Osta, and George Washington University


OPEN
RANGE
LIVESTOCK
AT
LARGE


THE HELP LODGE


WELCOME TO ROCKY BOYS RESERVATION
HOME OF THE CHIPPEWA CREE


THE HELP LODGE
WI-CHI-TO-KAH-MIK
Sah Ki Tok
Love One Another
Wi Chi Tok
Help Each Other


THE GREAT SEAL OF THE CHIPPEWA CREE TRIBE
OF THE ROCKY BOY'S RESERVATION OF MONTANA