



**Governor's Office of
Economic Opportunity**

CENTER FOR RURAL
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San Juan County
Rural Economic Blueprint

2025

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Courtesy of Jay Dash / Utah Office of Tourism

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Overview of the Rural Economic Blueprint Program Process

The Rural Economic Blueprint Program offers Utah’s rural communities an opportunity to leverage state-provided technical support to advance their economic development goals. The program is no cost, community-driven, and provides a simple yet effective economic development strategic plan. With an economic development strategic plan in place, communities will be better positioned to communicate their goals to funders, get buy-in from residents, acquire capital, and deploy resources towards target projects.

The program is in its first year and is working with nine communities during this pilot period. San Juan County was one of several applicants that were selected to participate in the first round of the program. The working team first met in July of 2025, followed by a meeting with the steering committee in October of the same year. In that time, GOEO staff performed one-on-one interviews with nine key stakeholders, solicited survey responses from nine members of the community, compiled economic data from various sources, and reviewed the 2018 General Plan update. Individual stakeholder contributions to this report have been kept anonymous.

The following report is the result of a collaborative effort led and facilitated by GOEO staff with direction from San Juan County stakeholders. The goal of this program is to ensure that this effort represents the desires of the community as a whole.



Courtesy of Sandra Salvas / Utah Office of Tourism

San Juan County Economic Data Snapshot

Population: 14,601

According to the Census Bureau, San Juan County has grown by 93 people (0.2% annualized) from April 1, 2020, to July 1, 2024, since the last decennial census in 2020¹. This is a small decrease from the 0.5% annual growth rate for the preceding 30-year period from 1990 – 2020². Comparing the same periods, statewide population growth has dropped from 3% to 1.8% annual growth, while nationwide growth has slowed from 1.1% to 0.7% annual growth³.

San Juan County, Utah, and USA Population (1990 – 2024)

Year	San Juan Population	Growth Rate (Annualized)	Utah Population	Growth Rate (Annualized)	USA Population	Growth Rate (Annualized)
1990	12,621	0.5%	1,722,850	3.0%	248,709,873	1.1%
2000	14,413		2,233,198		281,421,906	
2010	14,746		2,763,885		308,745,538	
2020	14,508		3,271,608		331,449,281	
2021	14,494	0.2%	3,339,738	1.8%	332,099,760	0.7%
2022	14,411		3,391,011		334,017,321	
2023	14,390		3,443,222		336,806,231	
2024	14,601		3,503,613		340,110,988	

Median Age: 34.6 years

The median age of San Juan County is older than Utah’s median age of 32, but younger than the country’s median age of 39⁴.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2025, May). *Annual estimates of the resident population for counties in Utah: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024* (CO-EST2024-POP-49). <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html>

² U.S. Census Bureau. (2012, July). *Utah: 2010 population and housing unit counts* (CPH-2-46). U.S. Government Printing Office.

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024, December). *Annual estimates of the resident population for the United States, regions, states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2020 to July 1, 2024* (Report No. NST-EST2024-POP). <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html>

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Table B01002: Age and sex. *2019–2023 American Community Survey 5–Year Estimates*. Retrieved October 28, 2025 from https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B01002&geo_ids=05000US49037,04000US49,01000US

Employment Rate: 48%

Approximately 5,272 of the 11,037 San Juan County residents aged 16+ and in the labor force were employed during 2019–2023. This falls below both the national employment rate of 60% and the state rate of 67%⁵.

Median Household Income: \$54,890⁶

San Juan County’s median household income is roughly \$38,000 lower than Utah’s median household income of \$93,000 and \$15,000 lower than the national median of \$78,000⁷.

Educational Attainment (Age 25+): 20% hold a Bachelor’s Degree or higher

A greater proportion of San Juan County’s population possesses less than a high school diploma or only a high school diploma when compared with the state of Utah or the country as a whole. The proportion of residents with some college or an associate degree leads the state and the nation. Those with bachelor’s degree or higher trails behind the state and the nation.⁸

**Educational Attainment for San Juan County, Utah, and the USA
as a Percentage of Population Age 25+ (2019 – 2023)**

Educational Attainment	San Juan	Utah	USA
Less than a High School Diploma	12	7	11
High School Diploma	31	23	26
Some College or an Associate Degree	37	34	28
Bachelor’s Degree or Higher	20	37	35

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Table B23025: Employment status for the population 16 years and over. *2019–2023 American Community Survey 5–Year Estimates*. Retrieved October 21, 2025, from https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B23025&geo_ids=05000US49037,04000US49,01000US

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Table B19019: Median household income in the past 12 months (in 2023 inflation-adjusted dollars). *2019–2023 American Community Survey 5–Year Estimates*. Retrieved October 21, 2025, from https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B19019&geo_ids=05000US49037

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Table S1901: Income in the past 12 months (in 2023 inflation-adjusted dollars). *2019–2023 American Community Survey 5–Year Estimates*. Retrieved May 30, 2025, from https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S1901?g=010XX00US_040XX00US49

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). Table B15003: Educational attainment for the population 25 years and over. *2019–2023 American Community Survey 5–Year Estimates*. Retrieved October 28, 2025, from https://censusreporter.org/data/table/?table=B15003&geo_ids=05000US49037,04000US49,01000US

Major Industries

In San Juan County, the majority of employment comes from the community's top four industries, according to proprietary data provided by ESRI's Civilian Labor Force Profile⁹. Education, health care, construction, and public administration provide 55% of all jobs in the community. In terms of location quotients,¹⁰ mining-related industries are significantly more concentrated in San Juan County than the national average, with a score of 8.5, as does the recreation industry with a score of 2.3 and education with a score of 2.0.

Industry Breakdown by Percentage of Labor Force (2024)

Industry	San Juan (Jobs)	San Juan (% of Jobs)	USA (% of Jobs)	Location Quotient
Total	6,199	100.0%	100.0%	–
Educational Services	1,175	19.0%	9.4%	2.0
Health Care/Social Assistance	1,131	18.2%	14.5%	1.3
Construction	618	10.0%	7.0%	1.4
Public Administration	501	8.1%	5.0%	1.6
Manufacturing	488	7.9%	9.6%	0.8
Accommodation/Food Services	480	7.7%	6.6%	1.2
Retail Trade	394	6.4%	10.4%	0.6
Arts/Entertainment/Recreation	318	5.1%	2.2%	2.3
Transportation/Warehousing	278	4.5%	5.0%	0.9
Mining/Quarrying/Oil & Gas	173	2.8%	0.3%	8.5
Other Services (Excluding Public)	166	2.7%	4.7%	0.6
Admin/Support/Waste Management	153	2.5%	4.5%	0.5
Professional/Scientific/Tech	91	1.5%	8.4%	0.2
Agriculture/Forestry/Fishing	73	1.2%	1.1%	1.1
Wholesale Trade	64	1.0%	1.9%	0.5
Utilities	37	0.6%	0.9%	0.7
Finance/Insurance	26	0.4%	4.9%	0.1
Information	23	0.4%	1.8%	0.2
Real Estate/Rental/Leasing	10	0.2%	1.7%	0.1
Management of Companies	0	0.0%	0.2%	0.0

⁹ ESRI. (2025). *San Juan County, Utah: Civilian labor force profile* [Report generated from ArcGIS Business Analyst].

¹⁰ The location quotient is found by dividing the share of employment for an industry in one area by the same number for the same industry in another area. In San Juan County, 1,175 people are employed in education representing 19.0% of all jobs. Nationwide, 9.4% of all jobs are in education. $19/9.4 = 2$ which allows us to say that, in San Juan County, 2 times as many people have education jobs than the national average.

San Juan County Major Employers (September 2024)

Employer	City	Employed (#)	Description
Montezuma Crk Community Health	Montezuma Creek	250–499	All Other Outpatient Care Centers
Aramark Campus, LLC	Lake Powell	100–249	Marinas
Blanding Family Practice	Blanding	100–249	All Other Outpatient Care Centers
Blue Mountain Hospital	Blanding	100–249	General Medical and Surgical Hospitals
Energy Fuels Resources	Blanding	100–249	Other Metal Ore Mining
Gouldings Lodge	Monument Valley	100–249	Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels
Lisbon Valley Mining Co. LLC	La Sal	100–249	Copper, Nickel, Lead, and Zinc Mining
San Juan Hospital	Monticello	100–249	General Medical and Surgical Hospitals
San Juan School District	Blanding	100–249	Elementary and Secondary Schools
USU Statewide Campus	Blanding	100–249	Junior Colleges
Blanding City	Blanding	50–99	Executive and Legislative Offices
Blanding Elementary	Blanding	50–99	Elementary and Secondary Schools
Elk Operating Services LLC	Montezuma Creek	50–99	Crude Petroleum Extraction
Four Corners Regional Care Center	Blanding	50–99	Nursing Care Facilities
Monument Valley Health Center	Monument Valley	50–99	All Other Outpatient Care Centers
San Juan High School	Blanding	50–99	Elementary and Secondary Schools
Transportation Department	Blanding	50–99	School and Employee Bus Transportation
Utah State University	Blanding	50–99	Junior Colleges

The Utah Department of Workforce Services (DWS) collects these statistics via paperwork that employers submit each time they hire a new employee, and shares the data through its Firm Find tool¹¹. These statistics are organized by physical employment site, which is why entities such as San Juan High School and the San Juan School District appear as separate entries.

¹¹ Utah Department of Workforce Services. (2025, February). *Firm Find*. Retrieved October 21, 2025, from https://jobs.utah.gov/wi/firmfind/download/ffind_other.csv

Initial Assessment

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats Analysis

A review of relevant economic statistics (see San Juan County Economic Data Snapshot), combined with conversations with stakeholders, led to the development of a SWOT analysis that provided an initial assessment of economic conditions in San Juan County.

Strengths

Diverse Economic Foundation

- San Juan County's economy is supported by anchor employers in education, healthcare, tourism, and mining industries. This economic diversity provides resilience during fluctuations in the tourism and energy industries.

Workforce Development

- One of the county's institutional assets is Utah State University (USU) Blanding. It functions as a workforce development engine by providing a local path for practical certifications (e.g., CDL, Welding, Nursing) aligned with local employer needs.

Agricultural History and Future

- The county's communities were developed with agriculture as their foundation, with room to grow. The General Plan's Resource Management section confirms that supporting agriculture and "multiple use" of public lands is a long-standing county priority. Many stakeholders identified this as a base to develop more localized food systems.

Community Culture

- Stakeholder interviews and survey respondents convey a deep appreciation for the social fabric of San Juan County. Namely, a small town quality of life and a "close-knit community" that is resourceful, resilient, and takes care of each other.

Rich Natural Assets

- The county is home to globally recognized natural landscapes including Canyonlands, Bears Ears, the San Juan River, Lake Powell, and Monument Valley, which serve as the bedrock of the tourism economy. Geological deposits of uranium, oil, potash, copper and other critical minerals drive the local energy and mining industries.

High Entrepreneurial Desire

- Stakeholders identified numerous aspiring entrepreneurs (e.g., barbers, bakers, fabricators) who are “ready to go” but are constrained by a lack of commercial space and essential infrastructure needed to start or grow their businesses.

Weaknesses

Water Quality and Scarcity

- This is the most frequently cited barrier, appearing in interviews, the survey, and regional reports as an existential threat. A stakeholder mentioned an anecdote of a community garden failing specifically because they could not acquire water rights, which makes this a concrete, immediate problem, not just a future risk. Additionally, documented water contamination concerns in some areas further exacerbate this risk.

Critical Housing Shortage and Affordability Crisis

- Nearly every stakeholder and planning document identifies a severe lack of attainable housing as a primary barrier to workforce attraction and therefore growth. According to the “Dwelling on the Future” report, 60% of households in San Juan County cannot afford an average-priced home if buying “from scratch.”

Broadband and Cell Service Needs

- The Navajo Nation CEDS and multiple interviews highlight limited service in many areas, making remote work, online education, and modern business operations difficult for a large portion of the county. There are exceptions to this, as Emery Telcom has run fiber lines to some parts of the county, providing fast and reliable broadband to those communities. Additionally, community centers provide access to Wi-Fi and areas with limited or inconsistent service.

A Lack of Commercial Space

- This is a primary barrier to growing the local economy. Stakeholders communicate that there is a lack of affordable office, retail, or light industrial space for rent. This is stopping the county's "ready-to-go" entrepreneurs before they can even start.

Geographic Remoteness

- Stakeholders noted that the county's vast, "frontier" geography creates high travel and supply costs. This pushes many community members to seek cheaper goods in larger neighboring economic hubs such as Cortez, CO; Farmington, NM; or Grand Junction, CO. This phenomenon also represents a challenge for the development and support of main street retail establishments.

Minimal Private Property

- This is a structural economic weakness for San Juan County that is detailed in the General Plan: as the vast majority of land in the county is controlled by federal and tribal entities, the private property tax base is exceptionally small, which limits the county's ability to fund public services and infrastructure. This also limits the amount of development that can occur on private land without navigating federal or tribal regulatory processes.

Opportunities

Major Industrial Expansion into Rare Earths

- The clearest and most frequently cited economic opportunity for San Juan County is the potential expansion of Energy Fuels, which stakeholders believe could add hundreds of new, high wage, head of household jobs and strengthen the local economy. The White Mesa Mill's ability to process and recycle uranium positions the local economy to grow with the state's desire to expand nuclear energy generation. However, future growth remains highly dependent on market trends, regulatory approvals, and continued engagement with affected communities, including robust monitoring and transparent communication.

Expand Local Agriculture

- Stakeholders discussed the need for more grocery stores and a desire to grow more food locally. One stakeholder had a strong vision for becoming a “local market hub” that incorporates traditional farming practices and can supply food to local communities. Additionally, there is an opportunity to strengthen the local agriculture industry’s ability to process and distribute products grown locally and regionally.

Carefully Grow Tourism Economy

- Develop locally oriented businesses that also cater to visitors and provide services and goods that residents currently travel outside the county to access. Visitor interest continues to grow in unique, experience-based activities hosted by local residents, where guests can participate in hands-on demonstrations, traditional skills, cultural storytelling, ranch or farm activities, agri-tourism experiences, and other place-based opportunities rooted in the heritage of San Juan County. Bluff’s Dark Sky designation creates strong potential for astro-tourism and nighttime programming. Additionally, opportunities for respectful partnership with Navajo Nation Chapter Houses and Tribal parks may support expanded cultural interpretation, community-led tourism, and experiences that honor local traditions and the natural landscape.

Leverage Broadband for a Digital Economy

- Expanding broadband is a top priority, consistently identified in every CEDS, the General Plan’s Capital Improvements section, and stakeholder interviews. Broadband infrastructure is a key enabler for a remote workforce. With robust, reliable internet access, residents, especially on the Navajo Nation and in rural communities, could access high-wage jobs in technology and professional services without leaving the county. This could help reverse the trend of youth and working-age residents leaving for job opportunities elsewhere. To realize this potential, the County should pair broadband expansion with workforce development and continued-education programs that build digital skills, remote-work readiness, and computer literacy. For example, tailored training programs in remote work tools, online communication, and virtual job pathways would ensure residents can fully take advantage of new connectivity.

Support Economic Development Through Entrepreneurship

- Ensure that home-based businesses are able to thrive and that light manufacturing has room to grow. Extend utility infrastructure to appropriate commercial sites to enable private development.

Threats / Barriers to Progress

Water Constraints

- Water availability remains the most significant barrier, cited across all data sources. Successful management of a limited water supply will determine the ceiling on future development.

“Brain Drain” and Population Stagnation

- As one survey respondent stated: “our greatest export is our children”. This fear is validated by the “Dwelling on the Future” assessment, which forecasts population decline. Unless addressed, this demographic change represents a slow diminishing of the community’s future workforce and tax base.

External Policy on Public Lands

- San Juan County’s economy is highly sensitive to federal land policies, including national monument designations, grazing regulations, and mineral extraction rules. Because so much land is managed by federal agencies, local businesses, particularly in energy, mining, and ranching, face uncertainty tied to decisions outside county control. This dynamic affects long-term planning and investment, making it important for the county to remain adaptable and engaged in federal processes.

Resistance to Change

- Stakeholders shared that some residents fear that growth may change the rural character and close-knit identity of their communities. This feeling is rooted in a genuine desire to protect what makes San Juan County unique. At the same time, this hesitation can slow or stall important projects, making it harder for the county to stay competitive with neighboring areas. When opportunities are delayed or declined, residents often travel to Grand County and to regional centers in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico for jobs, goods, and services. This creates significant economic

leakage and shifts benefits to surrounding communities instead of keeping them in San Juan County. The result is a challenging tradeoff between maintaining community identity and ensuring long-term economic resilience.

Jurisdictional, Political, and Social Divisions

- According to stakeholders, getting things done in San Juan County requires the navigation of numerous governmental bureaucracies including those at the Federal, State, County, Local, and Tribal level. This has created challenges that have strained relationships between all parties and limits economic progress. Several stakeholders also emphasized that collaboration has been improving in recent years, offering a foundation for stronger regional progress moving forward.



Courtesy of Marck Guttman / Utah Office of Tourism

Ideal Vision for a Future Economy

Through one-on-one conversations with stakeholders and a review of survey responses, the following themes were identified as guideposts for the future of economic development in San Juan County.

A Diverse Economy of Family-Sustaining Jobs That Provides Economic Mobility

- The ideal future is a “stronger and more diverse” economy that retains its high-wage industrial base in health, education, and mining and fosters more local businesses that provide year-round employment while allowing for residents to climb the economic ladder.

An Economy Where Youth Can Return Home

- Stakeholders emphasized a future where young people can pursue education, develop skills, and return home to meaningful careers. Residents hope for a community where young adults can afford housing, raise families, and build their futures locally.

An Economy Built on Authenticity

- Residents of San Juan County want economic growth that stays true to the community’s roots. As one stakeholder said “I picture a community where people can thrive economically while staying connected to their traditions and environment.”

An Economy Supported by Improved Infrastructure

- Stakeholders see a clear bottleneck and envision a future where foundational needs are met. This means investment in affordable housing, broadband, childcare services, and available commercial space so entrepreneurs can launch and expand their businesses.

An Economy That is Built on Effective Communication

- A key component of the ideal future is a new era of communication and cooperation among government, tribal leaders, business owners, and citizens. Stronger coordination across jurisdictions is essential for aligning priorities and supporting sustainable economic progress.

Strategic Plan

Economic Development in the General Plan (2018)

Before presenting the goals, strategies, tactics, and projects established in this plan, it is worth reviewing the previous economic development policy on file for San Juan County. The new strategic plan builds on this existing plan and provides additional specificity and breadth.

The existing five year vision for economic development in the 2018 update to the general plan is included below:

Broadband – A key infrastructure hurdle for businesses is the cost of Broadband in rural Utah. A key goal would be identifying a way to reduce cost of service and creating competitive prices comparable to the Wasatch Front.

Transportation – A key goal would be to have arrived at a maintenance schedule for county roads. Additionally, implementing a transit plan in partnership with the reservation. Further development would include showing increased Cal Black Airport usage and county visitation by air utilizing aviation air traffic analysis.

Business Expansion and Retention – Deploy a countywide industry specific survey (including industries identified in the ASAP process) in order to identify challenges and opportunities for growth. Working with BEAR and EDCUtah to develop a County plan to address challenges and opportunities identified in the survey.

Diversification – ASAP industries narrowed to specific NAICS codes, and county actively pursuing company relocation. Identify existing businesses within ASAP identified industries to assist in expansion and development. Identified areas of workforce development and initiating the process of adding programs for workforce education.

Celebration of Culture and History – Visitors will experience local culture and history (local foods in restaurants, Native American Dark Sky interpretation, Native and Western artisan products available, Cultural tours). Hózhó education and promotion implemented throughout the county.

New Goals, Strategies, and Projects

Goal 1 – Retain, expand, and recruit businesses in San Juan County

Strategy Number	Strategy Description	Project Number	Project
1	Connect businesses to technical assistance	1	Support businesses to gain access to grants and resources such as the Weber State Wildcat Fund, USDA, RCAC, and subgrants funded by the Rural County Grant
		2	Update San Juan County's Economic Development Website
		3	Facilitate the Business Basecamp Conference and other educational workshops
		4	Support the newly rebuilt San Juan Chamber
2	Develop a Regional Entrepreneur Hub Network	1	Renovate the classroom and purchase equipment for the Monticello center
		2	Support innovation and business hubs in La Sal, White Mesa, Bluff, Monument Valley, and future locations
3	Retain existing businesses and recruit new employers to San Juan County	1	Collaborate with UIPA, EDCUtah, and GOEO identify target areas for development and market those parcels to prospective businesses
		2	Target scaleable startup businesses that focus on research and development in STEM fields and automated manufacturing

Goal 2 – Support the development of the local workforce

Strategy Number	Strategy Description	Project Number	Project
1	Build Economic Development Department capacity to manage workforce development programs	1	Hire an Americorps VISTA
2	Perform research to evaluate workforce development needs	1	Establish a committee to lead a workforce evaluation process in San Juan County
		2	Assess workforce gaps and work with local education institutions to create programs needed to fill those gaps
		3	Analyze the ability of the local workforce to meet industry needs

3	Expand workforce development programs	1	Create training programs in resume development, interview practice, basic math, office software, and other relevant skills
		2	Increase the quantity and outreach of job boards and job fairs in San Juan County
		3	Partner with stores and volunteer organizations to improve access to professional work clothing
		4	Develop a workforce pipeline that prioritizes volunteerism as a means to gain work experience and employment
		5	Renovate classroom space at the Monticello Library to improve ability to provide training
		6	Develop childcare resources in order to expand employment opportunities for working parents

Goal 3 – Maintain and improve the infrastructure necessary for economic development

Strategy Number	Strategy Description	Project Number	Project
1	Maintain existing levels of service to residential and commercial users	1	Appropriately fund and staff Planning, Building, and Road Departments
2	Improve infrastructure to alleviate capacity constraints that allow for the pursuit of additional economic development opportunities	1	Partner with private developers to build housing
		2	Support private expansion of broadband connectivity and seek grant funding
		3	Develop public transportation options to connect outlying rural areas to job centers
		4	Support natural gas pipeline extension to facilitate greater interconnection to commercial and residential users
		5	Improve water purification and distribution in the county

Goal 4 – Improve economic development department operations and sustainability

Strategy Number	Strategy Description	Project Number	Project
1	Increase department capacity to develop and execute programs	1	Increase paid staff to advance workforce development, economic mobility, and technical assistance programming
		2	Develop an internship program attached to the Department of Workforce Service's Vocational Rehab Program
2	Improve departmental operations to ensure short term effectiveness and long term sustainability	1	Develop standard operating procedures for the department
		2	Create a project management dashboard for the department
		3	Develop financial sustainability for the department through grant funding, county general fund, and sponsorships
		4	Create quality annual reporting to the commission and the public
		5	Create effective public communication about department programs through social media, email, and print media

Goal 5 – Implement the San Juan County Rural Economic Blueprint

Strategy Number	Strategy Description	Project Number	Project
1	Create systems of accountability and support to ensure that the plan is implemented	1	Create or designate an implementation committee to oversee the completion of the plan
		2	Assign specific staff with the responsibility of implementing the plan
		3	Allocate sufficient funding to support staff and committees as they implement the plan



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