CHAPTER 6 ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ELEMENT

Introduction

Cultivating and supporting a vibrant and diverse economy is important to Adams County. While the predominant industry will remain agriculture, Adams County has room to grow other compatible industries. County residents need employment opportunities and the County needs the tax base to pay for essential services. While Adams County faces challenges common to rural communities in recruiting new businesses and industries, its strategic location, agricultural foundation, and development potential provide significant long-term economic opportunities when supported by targeted infrastructure investments and regionally responsive economic development strategies.

Economic development is a broad concept for many different actions and strategies that can be taken. In this Element, the term is generally used to describe proactive actions by the County that will directly or indirectly result in the increase of commercial activity within the area. By providing clear policy direction, the county can foster a diverse and resilient economy while promoting sustainable growth. This element establishes goals and policies that will guide the County's future activities when pursuing important economic development issues.

Employment

Overall employment in Adams County has generally been growing at a slow but steady pace since 2015 based on the U.S. Census Bureau's Quarterly Workforce Indicator data. However, in 2025 the County experienced a two percent reduction in overall employment. Additionally, the employment index, or ratio of employment to population, has been increasing suggesting a larger share of residents are employed. Table 1 is based on census data.

Table 1 Employment Data, 2015 - 2025

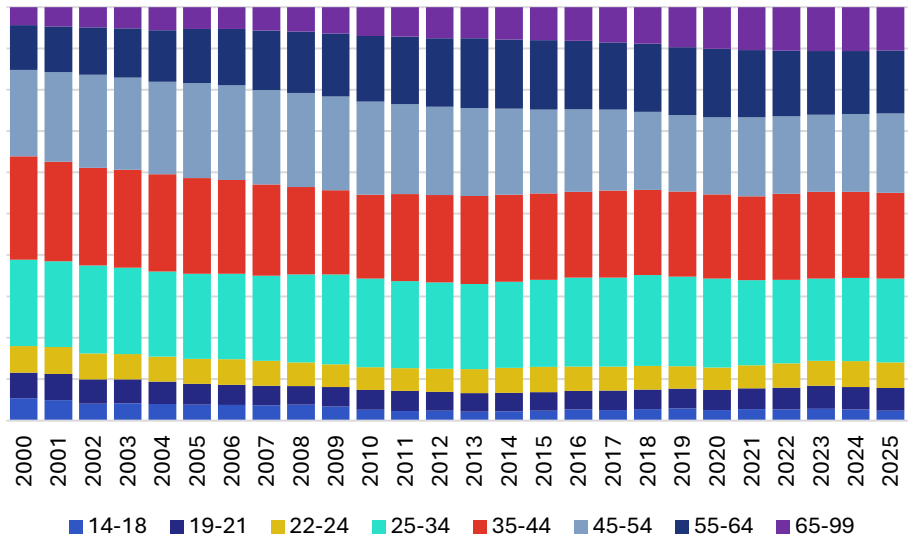
	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total Employment	7,354	7,415	7,544	7,783	7,895	7,873	8,225	8,520	8,834	8,962	8,800
Percent Change from the previous year		1%	2%	3%	1%	0%	4%	4%	4%	1%	-2%
Employment Index*	38%	38%	38%	39%	39%	38%	39%	40%	42%	42%	41%

**Ratio of employment to population – the proportion of the County's working age population that is employed.*

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Quarterly Workforce Indicators

By some metrics, the workforce is aging. Based on ACS 5-year estimates, the median age for workers has increased from 37.5 to 38.2 years of age between 2015 and 2024, which corresponds to a similar increase in the median age in the population (from 28.9 to 29.3 years). The data tool OnTheMap from the U.S. Census Bureau shows a relative increase in the proportion of those under 29 in the workforce, as provided in Figure 1. However, when the age categories are further disaggregated the data show those over 65 years are proportionally increasing in the workforce, from eight to ten percent between 2015 to 2025. Given the predominance of physically demanding industries, this could lead to labor shortages in the future, as young adults leave the county for education or employment opportunities.

Figure 1 Workforce Age Distribution, 2000 - 2025



Source: US Census Bureau

The county's employment types have been fairly stable throughout the years. Agriculture, and manufacturing, including food manufacturing, have consistently been the prominent employment sectors, and remain so today. Since 1990, employment in health care and social assistance and transportation and warehousing have seen a proportional, sustained increase. Manufacturing, together with the wholesale and retail trade sector, have seen proportional slight decreases.

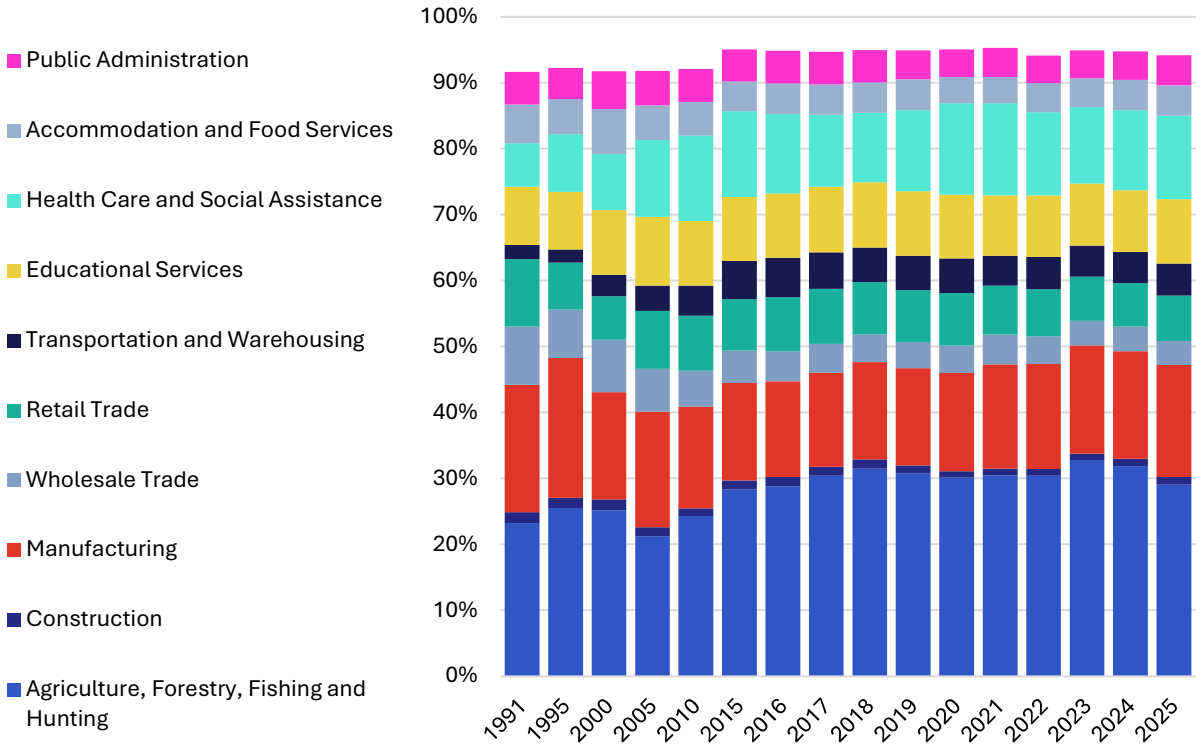
On an annual basis, the agricultural industry accounts for between 21 and 33% of employment. However, when examining the agricultural sector on a quarterly basis, a large seasonal variation is observed which is due to the amount of migrant labor needed for crops and other agricultural products. Consistently the third and fourth quarters, which include July through December, show a temporal uptick in agricultural jobs.[1]

[1] Note: The data is estimated from the first day of the quarter- i.e. for the fourth quarter the jobs are those on

Figure 2 displays the top 10 industries in Adams County and how they have proportionally changed since 1991. Note that not every year is showing, but every five years from 1991 to 2015.

Next, Figure 3 shows the quarterly breakdown of total jobs by industry. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 20% of jobs are in the public sector, with the largest component being those in education.

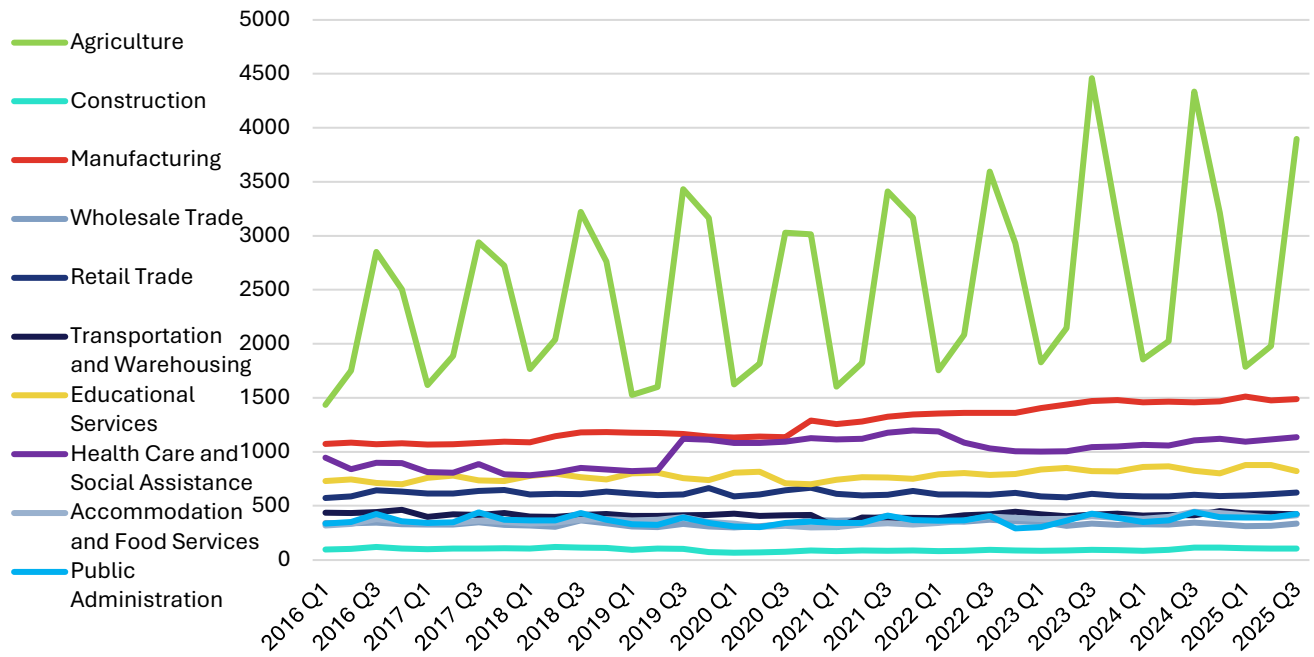
Figure 2 Industry Share of Jobs by 10 Largest Sectors, 1991 - 2025



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

October 1st.

Figure 3 Quarterly Jobs by Industry, 2016 – 2025



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Quarterly Workforce Indicators

Top Five Sectors by Employment (2024):

- Agriculture
- Government
- Manufacturing
- Healthcare and social assistance
- Retail Trade

Source: WA State ESD

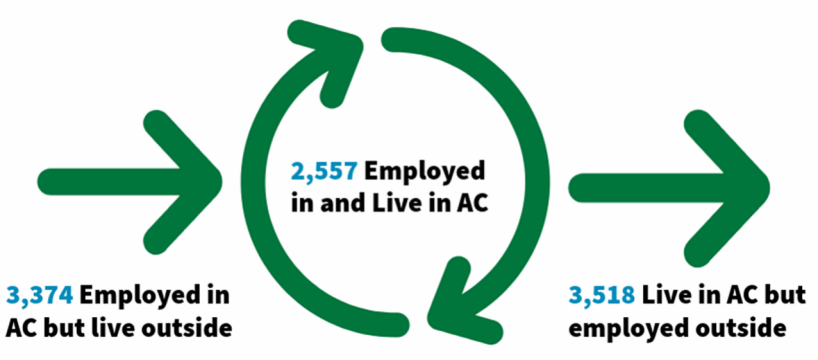
Top Five Sectors by Wages (2024):

- Utilities
- Wholesale trade
- Finance and insurance
- Manufacturing
- Professional, scientific & technical services

Source: WA State ESD

Employment Inflow and Outflow

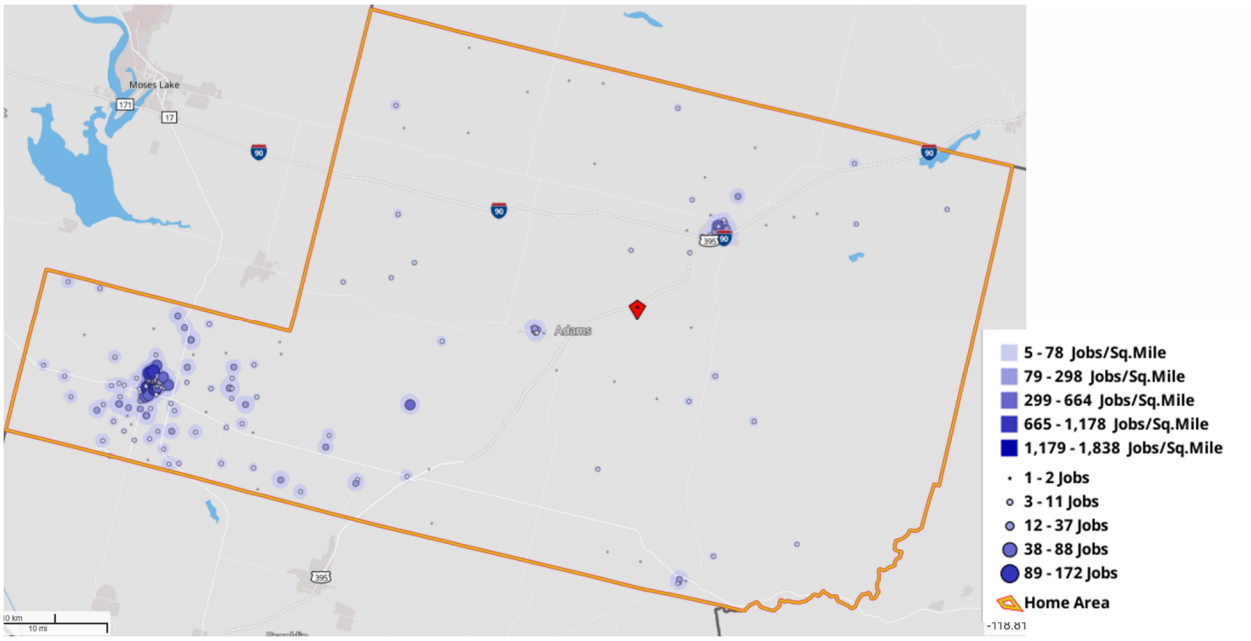
US Census Bureau's OnTheMap tool shows the movement of workers into, out of, and within Adams County.



In 2023, there was a slight outflow of jobs for all workers (-144), meaning that more County residents leave the county for work than non-residents commute into the County for work. More than half of local jobs (57%) are filled by workers who live outside the county, while more than half of employed residents (58%) leave the county for work. 42% of employed residents both live and work in Adams County, or a total of 2,557.

Around 42% percent of workers both live and work in the county. Jobs tend to be concentrated around Othello and Ritzville, with some commercial density in other parts of the County. Figure 4 shows the employment locations in 2023 for all primary jobs in Adams County.

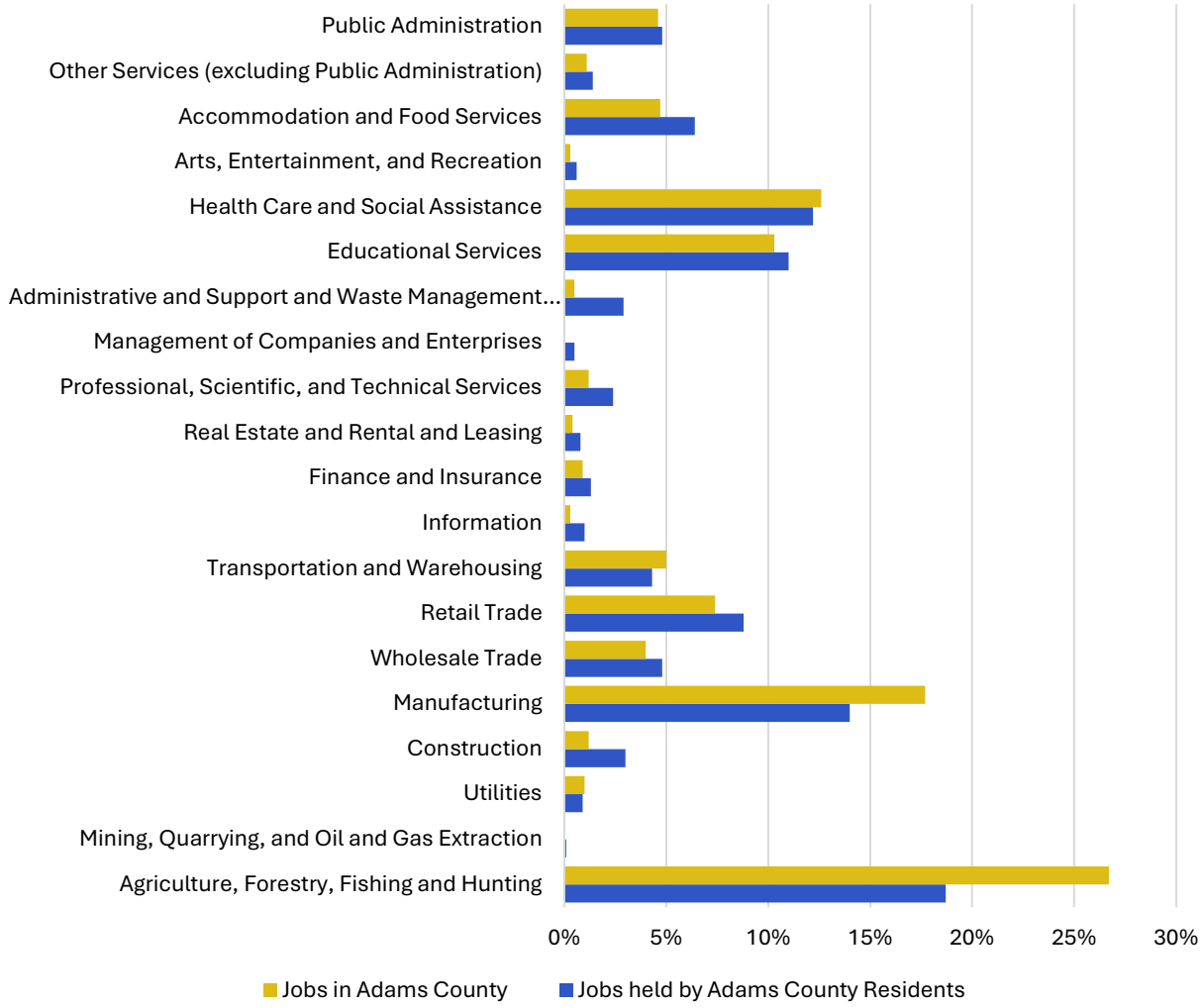
Figure 4 Employment Locations, 2023



Source: US Census Bureau, OnTheMap

There are more agricultural, and manufacturing jobs found within the County than residents employed in those fields. Meanwhile, service-based jobs, such as real estate, and finance are more likely to be found outside the County. Jobs in these sectors, referred to as FIRE (finance, insurance, and real estate) are often sought after by communities, as they tend to produce high incomes. **Figure 5 Comparison of Jobs in Adams County and Jobs Held by Adams County**

Residents



Source: US Census Bureau, OnTheMap

Income

Maintaining economic vitality requires incomes to increase at a rate that keeps pace with inflation and with the cost of living in the County. Increases in median income may indicate the expansion of higher-wage industries, improvements in workforce skills, or broader economic growth. Median income data presented in this element are sourced from the Washington State Office of Financial Management, the Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the U.S. Census Bureau's ACS 5-Year Estimates.

Income versus Wages

Income is the total of all earnings including investment income, income from other sources such as rental income. It can also include social security, disability and unemployment. Income is estimated at the dwelling unit (i.e. household or family).

Wages are payment for work. Data for wages do not include the self-employed, military, students living on campus, or Native Americans working on reservations. Wage data is taken at the place of employment.

Income and wages measure different aspects of economic well-being. Income includes earnings from all sources, while wages represent compensation earned directly through employment. Wages are tracked by the State Department of Employment Security (ESD) and are based on "covered" employment (employment activities that are eligible for unemployment insurance). Table 2 presents median annual wages for Adams County. Wages are a key measure of economic well-being because they represent income earned through employment. Unlike investment income, retirement income, or other non-wage income sources, wages help assess whether local jobs provide sufficient earnings to support households based on the area's cost of living.

Table 2 Median Annual Wages, 2015 – 2025

	Median Household Income	Median Family Income	Per Capita Income	Median Wage
2015	$47,646	$49,723	$41,490	$34,598
2016	$49,501	$53,020	$37,628	$35,653
2017	$48,849	$54,644	$36,616	$35,942
2018	$52,870	$56,633	$37,218	$36,248
2019	$53,535	$56,436	$39,576	$36,770
2020	$56,421	$57,305	$43,026	$39,677
2021	$57,405	$58,384	$48,967	$41,384
2022	$62,410	$68,425	$51,773	$43,909
2023	$67,056	$70,719	$54,396	$50,474
2024	$72,048	$73,287	$56,262	$52,288
2025	$69,332			$54,875

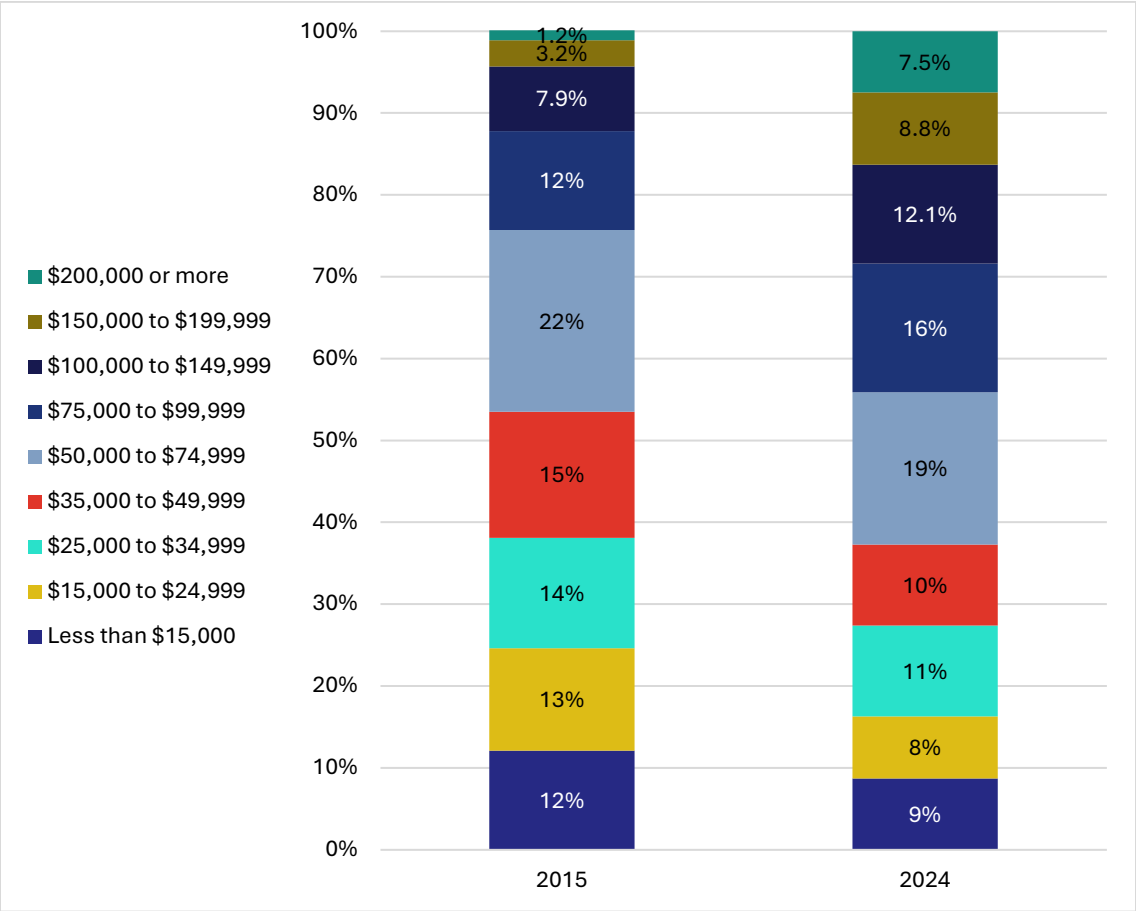
The income data is based on Median Family Income not Median Household Income. Median Family Income includes only those in the same household that are related, while Median Household Income is anyone (related or not) in the same home.

Income Distribution

Understanding how income is distributed across households is important to consider when developing economic policies. While overall income growth is generally positive, gains concentrated within a limited segment of the income spectrum can mask underlying economic disparities or labor market inefficiencies. For example, income growth concentrated among higher-income households may increase median income levels without broadly improving economic conditions, potentially influencing housing affordability and eligibility for certain income-based programs. Conversely, growth concentrated among lower-income households may indicate an increasing need for public assistance or limited access to higher-wage employment opportunities. Evaluating income distribution alongside overall income growth provides a more complete picture of economic health and prosperity within the county.

In 2015, minimum wage was $9.47 per hour so someone working full time on minimum wage would have earned approximately $19,698 in annual wages.

Table 3 Income Distribution, 2015 & 2024

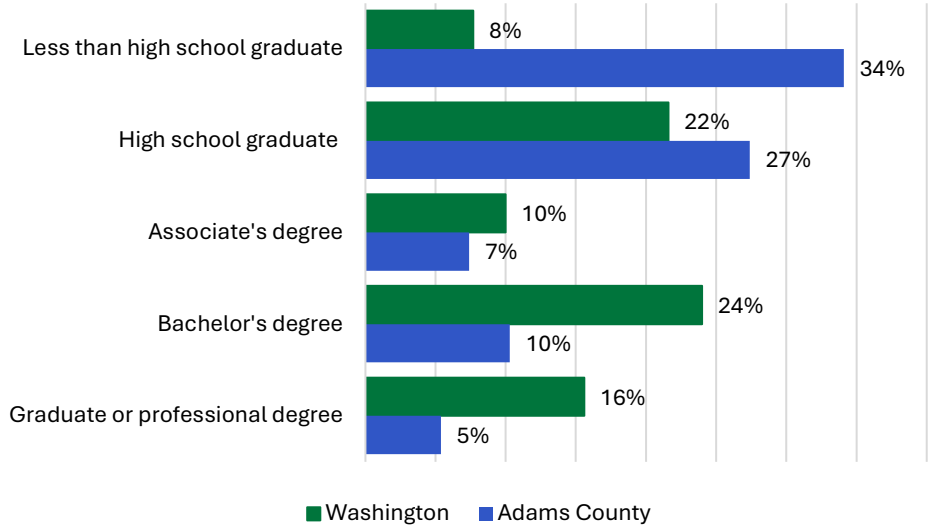


Educational Attainment

Compared to statewide educational attainment, residents in the County have substantially lower levels of educational achievement. This is particularly true of those who did not graduate high school, which is approximately 34% of those over 25 years old in the county, versus approximately 8% statewide. The data[2] shows correlations between race and ethnicity and high school graduation rates. For those who identify as white alone, but not Hispanic, approximately 91% in the county are high school graduates. For those who identify as Hispanic or Latino, high school graduation rates fall to approximately 46%.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2024 Table S 1501.

Figure 6 Educational Attainment, Adams County and Washington State, 2024

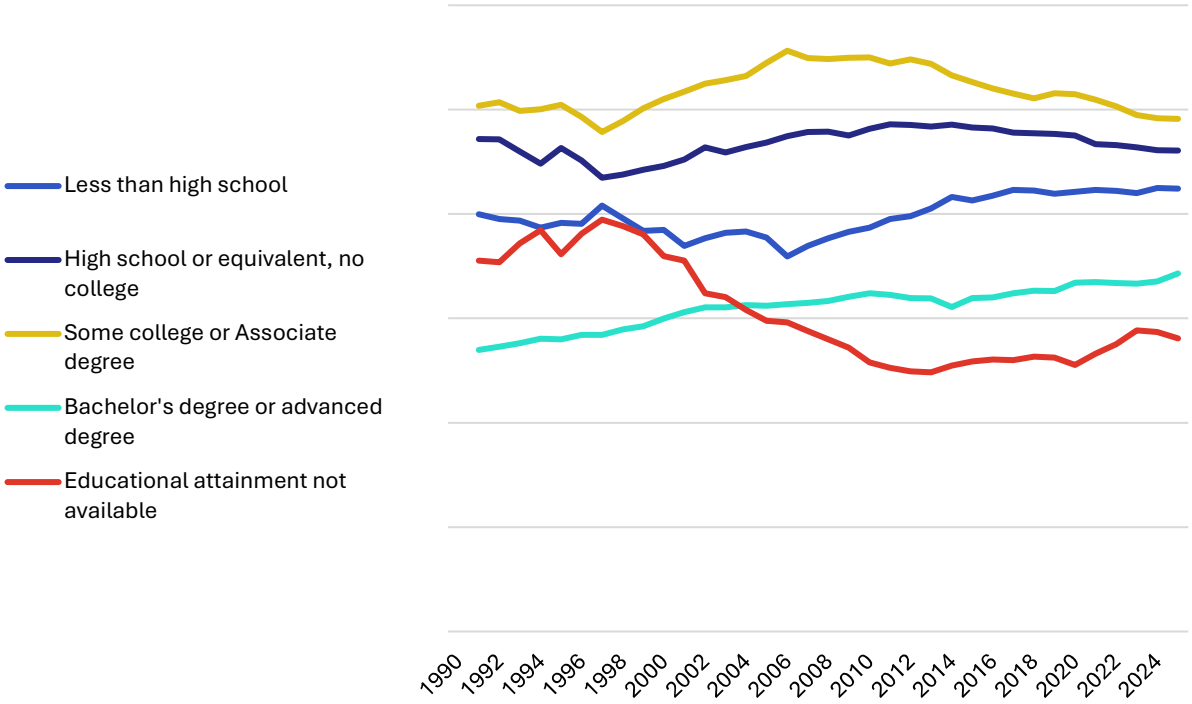


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 5-Year Estimates, 2024

The data also show an increase in median earnings correlated with education level. For those in the county with educational levels less than a high school degree, estimated median earnings were $29,151, compared to $97,273 for those with a graduate degree.

However, the education levels required for jobs within the county has remained relatively stable since 1991- with approximately 48 percent of jobs requiring high school graduation (or not requiring it at all). The percentage of jobs requiring at least a bachelor's degree has increased from approximately 13 percent to about 17 percent from 1991 to 2025. Agriculture and food manufacturing jobs, the two most prominent industries in the county, generally do not require higher levels of education.

Figure 7 Educational Attainment, 1991 - 2025



Big Bend Community College

Big Bend Community College (BBCC) in Moses Lake provides traditional continuous learning classes and programs, as well as workforce skills training, professional development, and certificate programs. Located in adjacent Grant County, the public community college's district includes Grant and Adams Counties and the Odessa school district in Lincoln County.

Agriculture

Adams County's economy is driven by agricultural activities. As discussed earlier, it contributes between 20 and 40 percent of jobs, but has consistently been the primary industry by economic output, accounting for between 15 and 42 percent of county GDP between 2001 and 2024 according to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) conducts an agricultural census every five years and the most recent data is from the year 2022. In that year, there were 981,670 acres of farmland, approximately 78 percent of which was cropland, and around 20 percent was pastureland. Meanwhile, cropland contributes approximately 73 percent of value in sales, and livestock, poultry and products make up around 28 percent of sales in the county. The single largest component of sales is from "vegetables, melons, potatoes, and sweet potatoes," for which Adams County ranks 4th in the state, followed by "grains, oilseeds, dry beans, and dry peas," for which Adams County ranks 5th in the state. The market

value of products sold ($561,618,000) increased approximately 54 percent since the previous USDA Census in 2017, while net cash farm income increased by 128 percent to $130,230,000.

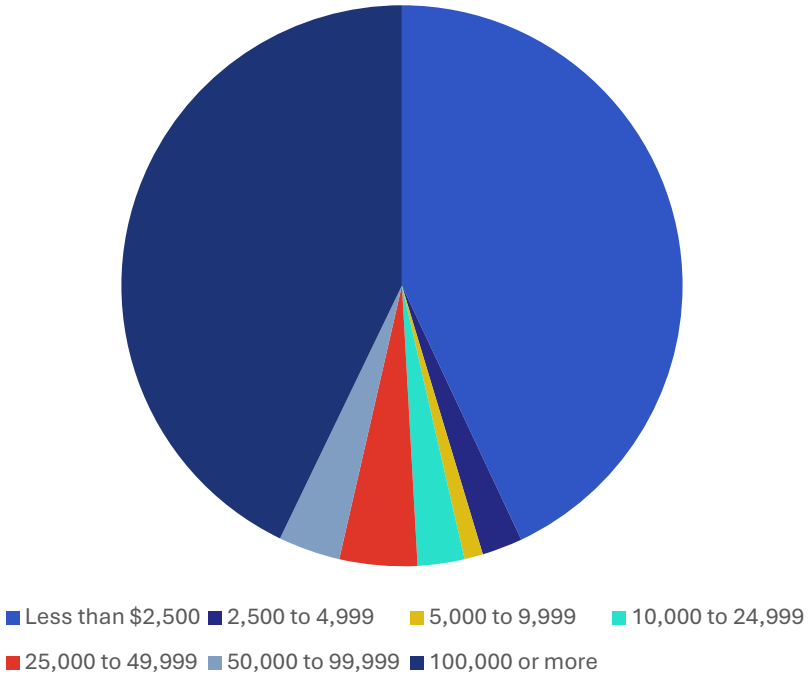
As shown in Table 4, the county-wide inventory of agricultural land has remained relatively stable, but ownership and operation patterns have shifted. In 2022, approximately 12% of agricultural land was irrigated.

Table 4 USDA Census of Agriculture, Selected Statistics

	1992	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
Number of Farms	602	628	717	782	713	586	558
Land in Farms (acres)	996,742	1,096,447	1,067,079	1,098,487	1,036,975	972,095	981,670
Average Size of Farms (acres)	1,656	1,746	1,488	1,405	1,454	1,659	1,759
Number of Farms with irrigated Land	324	294	316	304	261	225	192
Irrigated Land (acres)	141,852	148,018	120,746	124,515	127,046	127,913	115,112
Market Value of Products ($1,000)	221,059	201,873	202,854	344,130	430,155	363,876	561,618
Average per farm (dollars)	367,207	321,454	282,920	440,064	603,302	620,948	1,006,484

In 2022 there were 558 farms in Adams County, and 348 of them received government payments, totaling $19,377,000. Although the distribution of farm sales varies widely (Figure 8) , the average net farm income totaled $233,300 in 2022. The size of farms is more evenly distributed, although approximately 30 percent of farms are quite large, at 1,000 or more acres (Figure 9).

Figure 8 Adams County Farms by Sales Value

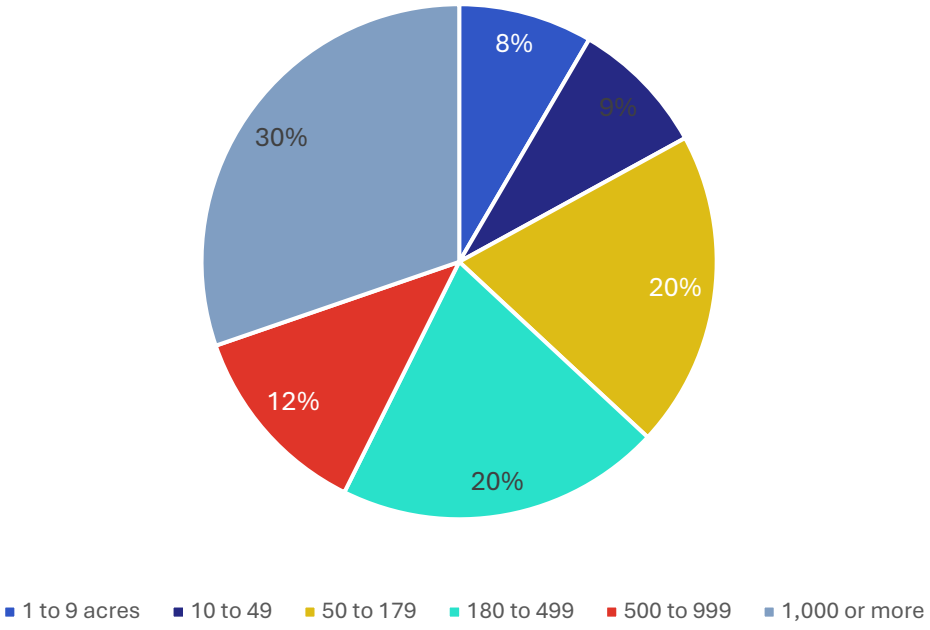


A producer is involved in making decisions for the farm operation. This could be a hired manager, a renter, or a family farmer. On the 558 farms in the County, there are 1,096 producers. Of those producers, 49 percent live on the farm they operate, and 65 percent do not work outside of their farm operation.

The average age of producers is 61.2 years. The continuation of existing farming practices depends upon future generations being willing and able to take over operations. The 2022 USDA Census identifies only 73, or about seven percent of Adams county producers, as "young producers" or those younger than 35. Efforts could be made to ensure continuing interest and profitability in farming as a profession. Studies have shown that when economic returns are favorable, more farmers enter the profession.[3] There could be opportunities to engage the Hispanic population, as only around three percent of producers identify as Hispanic/ Latino.

[3] https://farmdocdaily.illinois.edu/2024/05/age-of-us-farmers-not-a-problem.html

Figure 9 Adams County Farms by Size



Right to Farm

Agricultural activities conducted on farmland are often subjected to nuisance lawsuits, and such suits encourage, and at times force, the premature removal of the lands from agricultural production. Adams County protects agricultural activities conducted on farmland from nuisance laws. Adams County has adopted a "Right to Farm" policy (codified in Chapter 17.76 Adams County Code). The policy grants the same degree of protection to agricultural activities as Chapter 7.48.305 RCW but does not grant protection beyond that allowed by state law.

Business Recruitment and Retention

Due to the strategic location, low median age, affordable housing, available properties, and transportation options the County is in a strong position to host new industries and grow the existing opportunities that are complementary to agriculture. The County has several organizations that facilitate economic growth.

The Adams County Development Council (ACDC)

The Adams County Development Council was formed in 2007 as a nonprofit organization with 21 volunteer board directors. It is one of 39 State recognized Associate Development Organizations (ADOs) that furthers the county's economic development goals. Its mission is to provide services, resources and support for businesses in Adams County in order to strengthen the County's economy. Recognizing that economic development based solely on recruitment alone does not

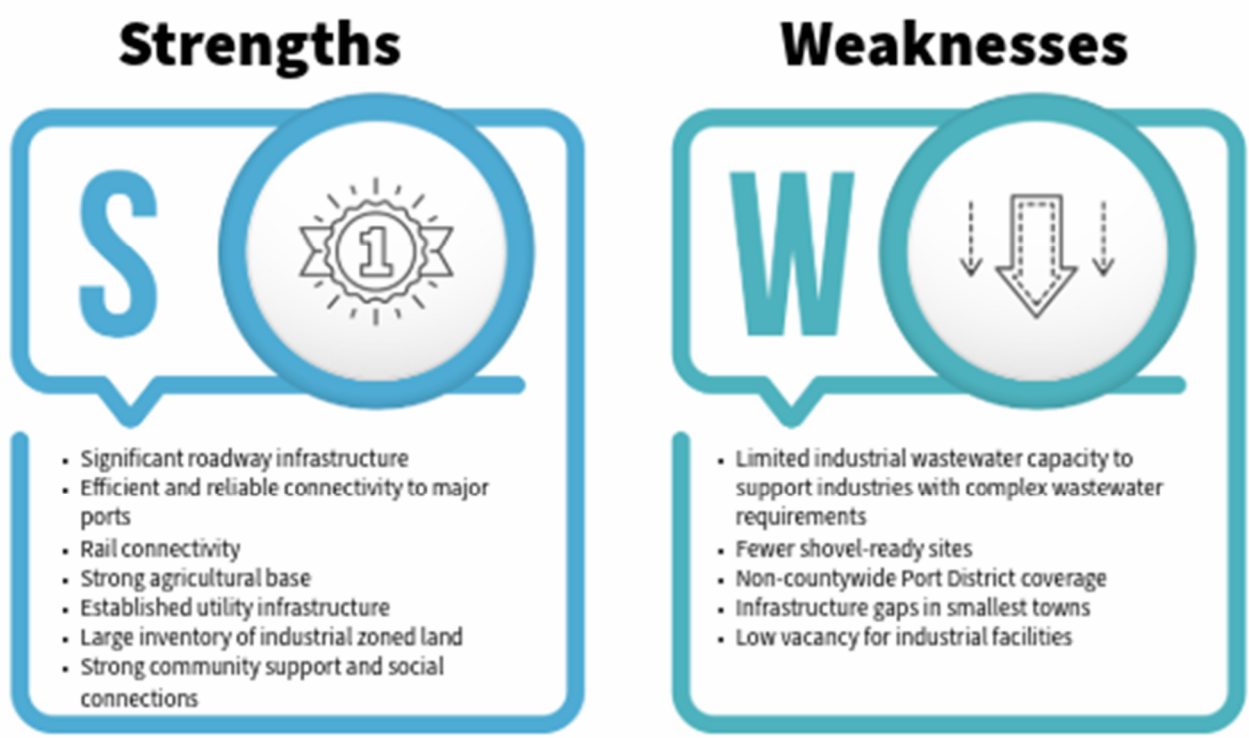
work, ACDC also focuses on business retention and expansion, workforce development, and community promotion.

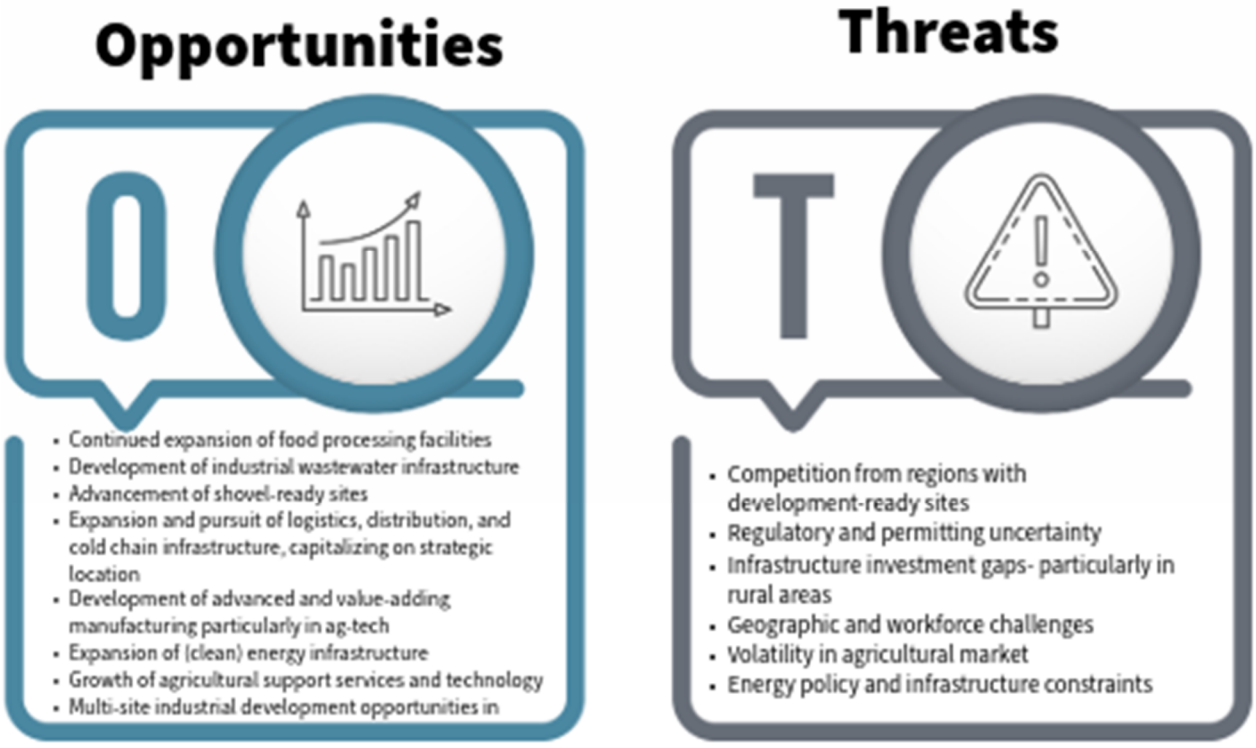
ACDC has spearheaded the Adams County Broadband Action Team (ACBAT), which includes a countywide team that endeavors to bring high-speed broadband access to the county. ACDC also promotes new industries to the region- such as large- scale renewable energy projects; recent recruited businesses include the Rattlesnake Flat 160 MW wind project, and Adam Nielson Solar, which is a 20 MW solar project in Lind.

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

One aspect of ACDC's work is to draft a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) for the County, scheduled to be completed in 2027. A CEDS is a five-year regional economic development strategy that identifies local priorities and guides economic development efforts. The strategy is required by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) for eligibility to receive certain federal economic development funding and can also help support applications for other state and federal grants.

In order to secure State funding through Department of Commerce to cover the costs for this endeavor, ACDC produced a preliminary report outlining the areas that are likely to appear in the CEDS document. The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis is included here, and were used to review and update the goals and policies in this element.





Source: Adams County Development Council

Port of Othello

A portion of the County is served by the Port of Othello. The Port was voted into existence in 1966. The Port is a public special district and is served by three elected officials. The Port encompasses 182 square miles in the panhandle area of the County. The Port's mission is to advance the economic stability of its District by establishing long term economic plans. The Port owns and operates the Othello Airport, the Bruce Water System, the Othello Business Park, and other commercial properties.

Avista Utilities

Avista serves portions of Adams County and contributes to local economic development efforts through utility infrastructure planning, support for business recruitment and retention activities, community investment programs, and participation in regional economic development partnerships.

Goals and Policies

Goal 1: Expand employment opportunities and economic development in unincorporated Adams County.

Policy 1: Support the creation, retention, and expansion of businesses that provide living-wage employment opportunities for county residents.

Policy 2: Promote cooperative efforts economic development efforts among city, county, tribal, regional, state and federal partners.

Policy 3: Collaborate with public, private and non-profit organizations to advance economic development, business growth, and job creation opportunities within Adams County.

Policy 4: Support partnerships among educational institutions, workforce training providers, and employers to align education and training programs with current and future workforce needs.

Policy 5: Pursue local, state, federal and other funding opportunities, as well as technical assistance, to plan and develop facilities and programs that attract new business.

Policy 6: Encourage compatible land uses in commercial and industrial uses to support existing businesses and, so as not to deter, delay or increase the cost of attracting new and/or retaining existing commercial and industrial development.

Policy 7: Streamline development review and permitting processes by providing clear information, application materials, checklists, user guides, and other resources that improve predictability and efficiency.

Policy 8: Coordinate with local, state, regional and federal agencies to streamline infrastructure planning and project review for transportation, water, wastewater, electricity, irrigation, solid waste, broadband, and other public services.

Policy 9: Support the maintenance and improvement of transportation infrastructure, including highways, rail facilities, freight corridors, and intermodal connections that facilitate the efficient movement of goods and access to regional markets.

Policy 10: Continue to support broadband expansion efforts to provide high-speed internet access for all County residents, businesses, educational institutions, and public services.

Goal 2: Create a diverse and resilient economy by supporting the long-term viability of agriculture and encouraging the development of compatible industries.

Policy 1: Coordinate economic development efforts that are consistent with other elements of this comprehensive plan.

Policy 2: Ensure adequate infrastructure and utilities are available in areas planned for economic development and employment growth.

Policy 3: Support value-added agricultural processing, warehousing, distribution, agricultural technology and related industries that strengthen the local economy.

Policy 4: Encourage the recruitment, attraction, retention and expansion of industries that are compatible with agriculture operations and the rural character of Adams County.

Policy 5: Encourage workforce development, apprenticeships, and student training and partnerships that align local skills with current and emerging employment opportunities.

Policy 6: Encourage programs that connect youth and young adults with job opportunities, training, and/or funding to support workforce retention and reduce out-migration.

Policy 7: Allow appropriate accessory and value-added agricultural activities that help agricultural operations remain economically viable while maintaining the long-term productivity of agricultural lands.

Policy 8: Support economic diversification efforts that build upon Adams County's existing strengths in agriculture, food processing, transportation, logistics, and natural resources.