

# Master Plan Steering Committee

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS**

Chad Banks - Rock Springs Main Street and WY State Representative

Chezney Goglio - Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism

Lisa Herrera – Green River Chamber of Commerce

Rick Lee – Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce

Kayla McDonald - Sweetwater County Economic Development Coalition

Jennie Melvin - Green River Main Street

Jenissa Meredith - Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism

# CITY / COUNTY / STATE GOVERNMENT

Steve Core – City of Green River

Kiley Ingersoll – Wyoming Business Council

Tim Kaumo – Mayor, City of Rock Springs

Laura Leigh - City of Rock Springs

Mark Lyon – City of Rock Springs and Travel & Tourism Board

Pete Rust – Mayor, City of Green River

Lauren Schoenfeld – Sweetwater County Commissioner

Randy Wendling – Chairman, County Commission

Keaton West - Councilman, City of Rock Springs

## BUSINESS / HOSPITALITY LEADERS

Bridget Bernard - Hampton Inn and Travel & Tourism Board

Devon Brubaker – Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport and Travel & Tourism Board

Randal Dale - Sweetwater Trails Alliance

Lucy Diggins-Wold – Flaming Gorge Tour Guide

Cory Gardner – Santa Fe Trail Restaurant and Travel & Tourism Board

Elizabeth Langi – Bitter Creek Brewing

Kandi Pendleton – Sweetwater Events Complex

Todd Redmon - Dominion Energy

# SWEETWATER COUNTY TOURISM

# MASTER PLAN

# February 2022

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# I. Why a Sweetwater County Tourism Master Plan?

The goal of the Sweetwater County Tourism Master Plan is to enhance and grow the Sweetwater County travel industry so residents and visitors can fully enjoy its benefits. The Plan is a guidebook for joint tourism development efforts for local governments, tourism stakeholders, and economic development partners.

# Benefits of the Plan include:

- \* Consensus on major goals and strategies,
- \* Collaboration by business, civic, and government organizations on travel industry projects,
- \* Reduced duplications of effort,
- \* Accountability on travel industry progress, and
- \* Inspiration for additional community enhancements.

This Sweetwater County Tourism Master Plan covers all of Sweetwater County.

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# II. The Master Planning Process

Sweetwater County Travel and Tourism engaged Rudloff Solutions to coordinate and conduct the planning process for this Tourism Master Plan.

The process was divided into two phases. Phase 1 included extensive research on the Sweetwater County travel industry and the identification of several strategic issues affecting the sector. Phase 2 included the development of strategies addressing the issues.

To oversee the entire planning effort, Sweetwater County Travel and Tourism formed a 26-person Steering Committee comprised of business, hospitality, economic development, and government leaders. The Committee provided input through in-person meetings and online feedback.

# Phase 1: Research

Rudloff Solutions and the Steering Committee performed several Phase 1 research steps in November and December 2021.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Reviewed 31 reports, plans, and research studies related to the travel industry, the local economy, and the development efforts of Sweetwater County, local economic development and civic organizations, state agencies, and the cities of Rock Springs and Green River (Appendix A). From this analysis, Rudloff Solutions identified 4 strategic themes that had been noted and discussed by several organizations in previous documents.

### RESIDENT SURVEY

Surveyed Sweetwater County residents (297 respondents) in an online questionnaire about the Sweetwater County travel industry, local amenities, and the strategic issues.

### **VISITOR SURVEY**

Surveyed previous Sweetwater County visitors (285 respondents) in an online questionnaire about area attributes and desired activities for a return trip.

### **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

Interviewed 19 travel industry, business, and community stakeholders to gather detailed input on the 4 strategic issues (*Appendix B*).



# Phase 2: The Plan

Rudloff Solutions developed draft strategies addressing the 4 issues identified in Phase 1. The Steering Committee provided feedback on the draft strategies in an online survey and prioritized major projects. Using this input, Rudloff Solutions completed the final Plan.

# III. Vision and Strategic Issues

# **VISION for the Sweetwater County Travel Industry:**

Sweetwater County enjoys rugged natural beauty and is an outdoor recreation destination and travel hub for Southwest Wyoming.



# Strategy 1. Partnerships and Collaborations

Sweetwater County local governments and economic development partners can better address travel industry challenges and implement critical projects by increasing their communications and collaborations.



# **Strategy 2. Outdoor Recreation**

Making Sweetwater County's abundant outdoor attractions more accessible and improving the overall outdoor infrastructure will enhance and enlarge this county strength. Coordinating the needs of stakeholders, landowners, and recreational users will be critical to ensuring a welcoming and sustainable tourism future.



# **Strategy 3. Attractions and Amenities**

Sweetwater County can improve its indoor and manmade attractions and amenities, including its Sweetwater Events Complex.



# **Strategy 4. Travel Industry Infrastructure**

Infrastructure items, like transportation and workforce, are critical components necessary for Sweetwater County to enjoy the full benefits of the travel industry.

# Implementation Glossary:

### **TIMELINES:**

Short term 1-2 years. Medium term 3-5 years. Long term 5-10 years.

### **LEAD AND SUPPORT ORGS:**

Cities = Rock Springs and Green River

GR = Green River

RS = Rock Springs

Airport = Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport

WWCC = Western Wyoming Community College SWOT = Southwest Wyoming Offroad Trails group

SWCTT = Sweetwater County Travel and Tourism

SEDC = Sweetwater County Economic

Development Coalition

Collaborative = Sweetwater County Outdoor Recreation Collaborative

Econ Dev Partners = SWCTT, SEDC, Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce, Green River Chamber of Commerce, Rock Springs Main Street, and Green River Main Street.

If one of the Econ Dev Partners is named specifically, it is expected to play a larger role than the others.



# IV. Strategies

# 1. Partnerships and Collaborations

A successful Tourism Master Plan requires stakeholders to agree on common goals and work together to attain them. This planning process has revealed that Sweetwater County has room to improve on this issue. Comments such as "working in silos" and "no countywide view" were common. On a positive note, stakeholders recognize the situation and realize that enhanced collaborations are critical for moving forward.



a. Make this Tourism Master Plan a unifying document among economic development agencies, local governments, and civic organizations.

**TERM:** Short

**LEAD: SWCTT** 

Collaborative

**SUPPORT:** Econ Dev Partners, Cities, County, Airport, Outdoor Rec Present the Tourism Master Plan to local economic development boards (SWCTT, GR Chamber, RS Chamber, Downtowns, SEDC), local governments, and civic/development organizations as appropriate. Seek adoption or receipt of the Master Plan by the groups. (Short term)

Hold semi-annual meetings (or more) of the Steering Committee for first two years, annually thereafter, to score-keep on progress and reprioritize/update the plan based on changing conditions and the status of projects. (Short term)

Integrate this plan into the work of governmental, economic development, and outdoor recreation groups. (Short Medium Long terms)

Provide regular updates of the plan's accomplishments to elected officials, the travel industry, and the public. (Short Medium Long terms)

b. Create stronger communication and collaboration among local economic development agencies and local governments, focusing on big picture goals and themes.

**TERM:** Short Medium

**LEAD:** Econ Dev Partners

### **SUPPORT:**

Municipalities, County, Airport

Establish sub-committees of the SEDC and the Collaborative to work on individual projects in this Tourism Master Plan. Examples: SEDC – Tourism Product Development; Collaborative – Wayfinding Signage. Develop action plans for the top prioritized projects, gain support from the "parent" organization (SEDC Board, complete Collaborative), and promote action to the appropriate governmental and other entities. (Short Medium term)

Use the SEDC and Collaborative subcommittees to implement projects and create trust and collaboration among partners.

Short term 1-2 years.

Medium term 3-5 years.

Long term 5-10 years.

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c. Investigate and pursue funding options (6th Penny tax and others) critical to this plan's goals and to broader county development.

Prioritize county and community needs and projects in a transparent and well-publicized manner to be ready for funding opportunities from federal, state, and local sources. (Short term)

**TERM:** Short Medium Long

**LEAD:** County, Cities, Econ Dev Partners Create a collaborative process among local governments to transparently develop and promote the next 6th Penny tax ballot. Use a public affairs committee to educate citizens on the need for the selected projects, as well as the process used to select the projects. Use the 6th Penny ballot effort as a unifying project. (Short Medium terms)

Keep in mind that both the lodging tax and 6th penny could be on the same ballot in Nov. 2022, creating the need for strong messaging and promotional efforts.

Consider new long-term funding tools for maintenance of existing infrastructure and development of new projects in addition to the 6th Penny tax. Educate elected officials and the public of the need for the funding. (ARPA funds – both local and state, Urban Renewal Districts, Tax Increment Financing, Business and Tourism Improvement Districts, etc.). (Short Medium Long terms)

d. Speak with a unified Sweetwater County voice on funding and legislative issues before local, state, and federal governments.

TERM: Short Medium Long LEAD: County, Cities, Econ Dev Partners





# 2. Outdoor Recreation

Sweetwater County's outdoor recreation attractions are enviable, even in an outdoor state like Wyoming. These amenities dominate lists of popular activities of both residents and visitors, who also rate them as being high in quality (Section 5). However, some of these attractions are difficult to access, undeveloped, and somewhat rugged. Improving existing outdoor attractions and creating new ones will be vital to making Sweetwater County a major outdoor recreation destination.



a. Develop and improve wayfinding and other information tools for existing outdoor recreation amenities throughout the county, making it easier to locate, access, and safely enjoy these amenities.

**TERM:** Short Medium

**LEAD:** Collaborative,

**SWCTT** 

**SUPPORT:** Econ Dev Partners, SWOT, County

Develop a wayfinding plan that identifies where signs are needed to direct visitors to existing attractions. The plan should include recommended sign locations, sign graphical designs, and funding options. Implement the plan. (Short Medium terms)

Use technological solutions (where appropriate and affordable) to help inform outdoor recreation enthusiasts (apps, maps, websites, etc.). (Short Medium terms)

Promote awareness of correct trail and outdoor recreation etiquette, clear boundaries between public and private land, and conscientious recreational habits. (Short Medium terms)

b. Work on developing and improving the Flaming Gorge experience from the Sweetwater County side of the gorge.

**TERM:** Medium Long

**LEAD:** Collaborative, State of WY, Forest Service

**SUPPORT:** SWCTT, Chambers, Recreation Stakeholder Groups Further develop, promote, and grow the Flaming Gorge Tours operated by SWCTT. Support and promote this attraction, with the goals of growing visitation and economic self-sufficiency for SWCTT. (Short Medium Long terms)

Support efforts to add trail connectivity in and around the gorge. (Short Medium Long terms)

Engage with the U.S. Forest Service to ensure appropriate recreation options are available at the gorge. (Short Medium Long terms)

Commit to a goal of a Wyoming State Park at Flaming Gorge. Develop an action plan for accomplishing this goal: Develop supporting data; Gain endorsements from Sweetwater County state legislators and local governments; Gain support from economic development, civic, and community organizations; Lobby WY State Parks; Educate residents; etc. If Flaming Gorge is not feasible, support this concept at another viable Sweetwater County location. (Short Medium Long terms)

Short term 1-2 years.

Medium term 3-5 years.

Long term 5-10 years.

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Green River Chamber of Commerce, Rock Springs Main Street, and

Green River Main Street.

c. Develop and promote outdoor recreation providers / outfitters to enable visitors and residents to more easily access and enjoy amenities, such as the Green River, the Killpecker Sand Dunes, etc.

**TERM:** Short Medium Long

Recruit new outdoor recreation suppliers, both from within and outside of the county.

Chamber grants and publicity tools where appropriate. (Short Medium terms)

Promote existing outdoor recreation suppliers to visitors and residents. Use SWCTT and

LEAD: SWCTT, Chambers

(Short Medium terms)

# **SUPPORT:**

Consider establishing an Outdoor Recreation Business Challenge to assist an existing or new provider. This could be in partnership with the WY Outdoor Recreation Office, SWCTT, the Collaborative, Chambers, WWCC, SEDC, or others. (Short Medium terms)

Collaborative, Recreation Stakeholder Groups

When making public outdoor recreation infrastructure investments, consider options that help stimulate private sector development and monetization. (Short Medium Long terms)

d. Support efforts of existing outdoor recreation groups working to create new and better outdoor recreation options in Sweetwater County.

> Support Southwest Wyoming Offroad Trails (SWOT) group and its efforts for increased offroad trail networks. (Short Medium terms)

**TERM:** Medium Long

LEAD: SWCTT,

County

**Econ Dev Partners** 

Support the Sweetwater County Outdoor Recreation Collaborative's efforts to bring together community members, stakeholders, federal agencies, and state agencies to support sustainable Sweetwater County outdoor recreation growth.

(Short Medium terms)

**SUPPORT: SWOT,** Collaborative, Cities,

Encourage SWOT and the Collaborative to work with the Master Plan Steering Committee to ensure efforts are coordinated and reinforcing each other. (Short Medium terms)

Engage landowner groups and other interests in recreation deliberations to overcome challenges with the checkerboard land ownership situation affecting many outdoor recreation projects. (Short Medium Long terms)



e. Develop trail networks in Rock Springs and Green River, with the overarching goal of connecting the two cities' trail systems with a unique and attractive trail for the benefit of residents and visitors.

**TERM:** Short Medium

Long

**LEAD:** County, Cities

**SUPPORT:** Recreation Stakeholder Groups, **Econ Dev Partners** 

Rock Springs and Green River should continue the development and promotion of their own inner-city trail and park networks. (Rock Springs - Bitter Creek; Green River -Greenbelt/Wetlands) (Short Medium Long terms)

Rock Springs, Green River, and the County agree (with governing body resolutions) on the long-term goal of connecting the two communities' trail systems, as well as with other attractions as appropriate. (Short term)

Develop a 10-15 year plan that includes 1) Rock Springs and Green River community park/trail development steps, 2) potential routes and needed actions for connecting the communities, and 3) needed communications and negotiations with the Rock Springs Grazing Association, Green River Livestock, Sweetwater Royalties, landowners, and other stakeholders. (Short Medium terms)

Build support for the long-term city connectivity plan by publicizing the idea and gaining the support of the public and relevant stakeholders. (Short Medium Long terms)

Connect the cities with the enticing new trail. (Long term)

# f. Develop recreational opportunities in the Red Desert.

**TERM:** Medium Long

**LEAD:** Collaborative

**SUPPORT:** SWCTT, County, Recreation Stakeholder Groups

Develop a plan for the best way to provide and develop a comprehensive set of experiences in the Red Desert that could include sand surfing and ATV riding at the Killpecker Sand Dunes, guided tours, primitive camping, a possible state park, or other options. (Medium Long terms)

Provide services and development assistance to implement the plan (if feasible). (Medium Long terms)

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# 3. Attractions & Amenities

While outdoor recreation dominates Sweetwater County's tourism industry, events and indoor activities also play a role. For instance, more than 80% of residents attend at least one event annually at the Sweetwater Events Complex, and tourists list festivals/events as one of their preferred activities when visiting (Section 5). However, the County lacks other indoor amenities and establishments desired by residents and visitors. Keeping existing venues updated and competitive, as well as adding new ones, will improve the county's appeal and quality of life.



a. Update / Enhance the Sweetwater Events Complex as a major events center for southwest Wyoming.

**TERM:** Medium

**LEAD:** County

**SUPPORT:** Cities, Econ

**Dev Partners** 

Assign a working group to implement the Events Complex's new Master Plan (expected completion Spring 2022). The SEDC Tourism Product Development committee (described under Strategy 1 – Partnerships) would be a good entity to address this need. (Short term)

Develop a comprehensive action plan for implementation that includes detailed timelines, possible funding mechanisms, needed political support, public relations, and other necessary steps to implement the new Master Plan. (Short Medium terms)

b. Investigate the need and support for new events space, such as a multi-purpose facility, sports fieldhouse, or other events venue that can host activities year-round.

TERM: Short Medium Long LEAD: Cities, County SUPPORT: Econ Dev Partners

c. Support development of one or more lodging properties with inhouse meeting space in excess of 10,000 sf. Consider regulatory incentives / assistance as appropriate.

TERM: Short Medium Long LEAD: SEDC, Cities SUPPORT: Econ Dev Partners, County

d. Support development of new or expanded attractions and businesses to help fill community and visitor needs (when they are financially feasible).

**TERM:** Short Medium Long **LEAD:** SWCTT, Econ Dev Partners, Cultural Organizations

**SUPPORT:** WWCC

e. Support downtown development efforts led by the Rock Springs DDA and Green River Main Street.

**TERM:** Short Medium Long **LEAD:** Rock Springs Main Street, Green River Main Street

**SUPPORT:** Cities, Econ Dev Partners

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# 4. Travel Industry Infrastructure

An area's travel infrastructure often determines how successful the area is in enjoying tourism's economic benefits. This planning process revealed the need to improve these basic building blocks for Sweetwater County's hospitality industry. In particular, the research indicated significant interest in the beautification of the gateways into the County's major communities.



a. Improve the major Gateways into Rock Springs and Green River, both at the interstate exits and entrances into the downtowns, making them more attractive to visitors.

Build on the new WYDOT gateway beautification grant for Rock Springs to increase awareness of the beautification needs of Rock Springs and Green River. (Short Medium Long terms)

**TERM:** Medium Long

**LEAD:** Cities, WYDOT

**SUPPORT:** Econ Dev Partners, County

Coordinate future road projects to create memorable gateways into Rock Springs and Green River as possible. (Short Medium Long terms)

Beautify 180 incrementally on all future construction projects using the enhancements portions of each road project budget. (Medium Long terms)

Explore options to incentivize commercial and residential landowners on major entryways to make their properties more attractive through landscaping, fencing, and general clean-up efforts (beautification awards, pride campaigns, etc.). (Short Medium Long terms)

b. Protect the Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport for all the benefits it brings to Sweetwater County.

**TERM:** Short Medium Long

**LEAD:** Cities, County

**SUPPORT:** Airport, Econ Dev

Partners, Civic Orgs

Create an Air Service Task Force to focus on the retention and growth of air service connectivity, through such efforts as a public relations/marketing campaign for using the local airport. (Short Medium Long terms)

Monitor developments and trends in rural air service to be aware of the possible need to act more aggressively. (Short Medium Long terms)

Support physical enhancements to the Airport as feasible. (Short Medium Long terms)

c. Develop efforts to improve both the quality and quantity of the local hospitality workforce.

**TERM:** Short Medium

**LEAD:** SWCTT, Chamber, SEDC

**SUPPORT:** Econ Dev Partners

Continue the SWCTT Certified Tourism Ambassador program. Grow it and publicize it widely. (Short term)

Explore training opportunities with Western Wyoming Community College. (Short Medium Long terms)



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# V. Research Highlights from the Visitor and Resident Surveys

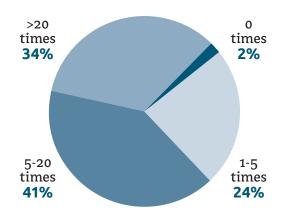
**VISITORS** – Word or Phrase that represents Sweetwater County

fishing beauty great
outdoors racing track
fun
love nice beautiful dirt
scenery gorge flaming wild
scenery geople area west
horses western open

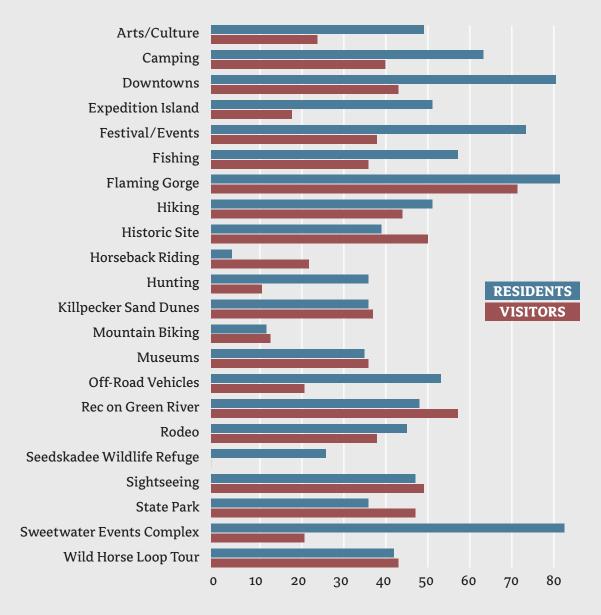
**RESIDENTS** – Word or Phrase to Represent Sweetwater County



**RESIDENTS**: How many times do you participate in outdoor recreation in Sweetwater County annually?



Top Sweetwater County Activities **Experienced by RESIDENTS** Yearly and **Desired by VISITORS** on a Return Trip



Ratings of the Quality of Sweetwater County Amenities by **VISITORS** and **RESIDENTS**(5 High Quality, 1 Low Quality)

	VISITORS	RESIDENTS
<b>Outdoor Recreation</b>	4.3	4.0
Hospitality	4.2	3.5
Restaurants/Shopping	3.8	2.5
Attractions	3.8	2.9
Attractiveness	3.8	3.2
Downtowns	3.6	3.15
Events	3.6	3.4

# VI. Appendices

# **Appendix A**

SWEETWATER COUNTY DOCUMENTS REVIEWED

### SWEETWATER COUNTY TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism Strategic Plan, 2020 Sweetwater County Destination Next Assessment, 2020 Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism Annual Report, 2020 Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism Visitor Profile Research, 2020

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGS**

Great Divide Economic Development Coalition Comprehensive Econ. Dev. Strategy, 2020 Downtown Rock Springs Vision 2020 Plan Rock Springs DDA Transformational Opportunities, 2019 Flaming Gorge Way Corridor Study, 2020

### CITY/COUNTY

Rock Springs 2012 Master Plan
Green River Comprehensive Master Plan, 2012
Rock Springs Branding, Marketing and Development Action Plan, 2007
Green River Marketing, Branding and Design Action Plan, 2010
Western Wyoming Community College Strategic Plan, 2021-26
Southwest WY Regional Airport Terminal Plan, 2019
Draft 6th Penny Project Considerations, 2021

### **ATTRACTIONS**

Sweetwater County Outdoor Recreation Collaborative Preliminary Project List, 2021 Green River Greenbelt Master Plan Survey – Summary, 2021 Sweetwater Events Complex Exhibit Hall Expansion & Renovation Plan, 2021 Field House Conceptual Plan, 2021 Southwest Wyoming Off-Road Trails (SWOT) Monthly Meeting Notes, 2021

### STATE / FEDERAL

Wyoming Game and Fish Department Forging the Future Strategic Plan 2018-2023
Ashley National Forest Plan Revision, 2020
Spring 2020 BLM Wyoming Hot Sheet
Fontenelle Dam Working Group Meeting Notes, 2020
2020 Wyoming Aviation Economic Impact Study
Report of Wyoming Governor's Task Force on Outdoor Recreation 2017
WY Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan 2019-23

Wyoming Office of Tourism Strategy Overview FY 21-22
Wyoming Office of Tourism Economic Impact of Travel to Wyoming, 2020
State of Wyoming Economic Development Strategic Plan, 2019 (WY Business Council)
WYDOT State Transportation Improvement Program 2022

# **Appendix B**

# STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Chad Banks – Rock Springs Main Street and WY State Representative Bridget Bernard – Hampton Inn and Travel & Tourism Board

Devon Brubaker - Southwest Wyoming Regional Airport and Travel & Tourism Board

Steve Core - City of Green River

Randal Dale – Sweetwater Trails Alliance

Chris Floyd - Wyoming Outdoor Recreation Office

Dave Hanks – Retired Rock Springs Chamber Director

Tim Kaumo - Mayor, City of Rock Springs

Rick Lee - Rock Springs Chamber of Commerce

Laura Leigh – City of Rock Springs

Mark Lyon - City of Rock Springs and Travel & Tourism Board

Kayla McDonald - Sweetwater County Economic Development Coalition

Jenissa Meredith - Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism

Kandi Pendleton – Sweetwater Events Complex

Pete Rust - Mayor, City of Green River

Diane Shober – Wyoming Office of Tourism

Randy Wendling - Chairman, Sweetwater County Commission

Keaton West - Councilman, City of Rock Springs

Cliff Wittstruck II – Western Wyoming Community College

# **Appendix C**

# **PROJECT TEAM**

Darren Rudloff – Rudloff Solutions Jenissa Meredith – Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism Chezney Goglio – Sweetwater County Travel & Tourism



# SWEETWATER COUNTY TOURISM MASTER PLAN



Partnerships and Collaborations



Outdoor Recreation



Amenities



Attractions and Travel Industry Infrastructure