Partnering with Tribal Nations for Economic Prosperity

NADO Research Foundation

First Nations Development Institute

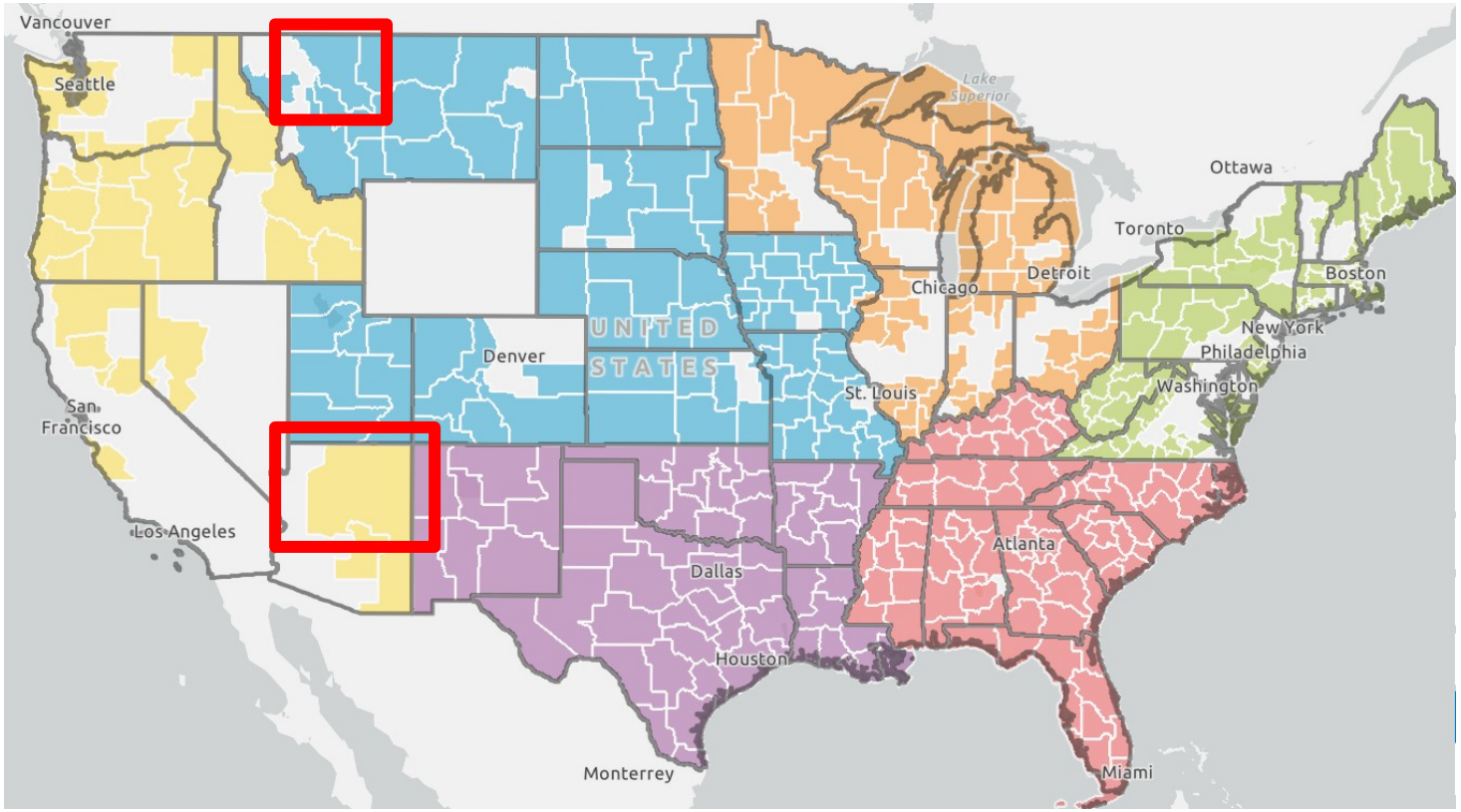
October 21, 2026

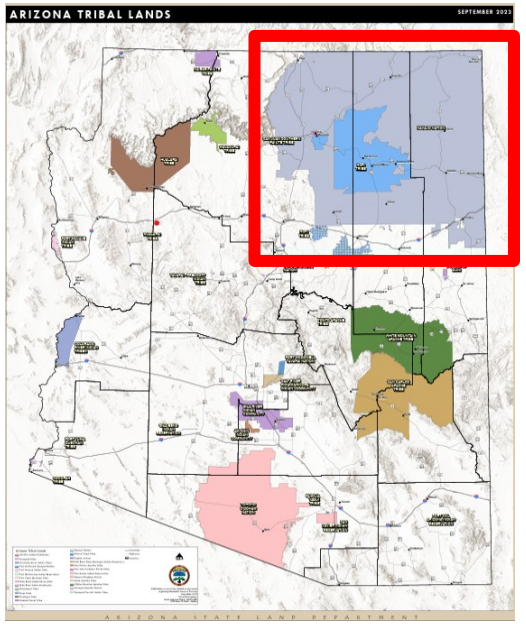
Session Walk-a-ways:

- Importance of meaningful tribal partnerships and collaborations for regional prosperity
- Vision and approaches for economic development initiatives
- Open discussions, sharing knowledge as Community of Practice (CoP) professionals

Any Specific walk-a-way from the audience?

Partnerships

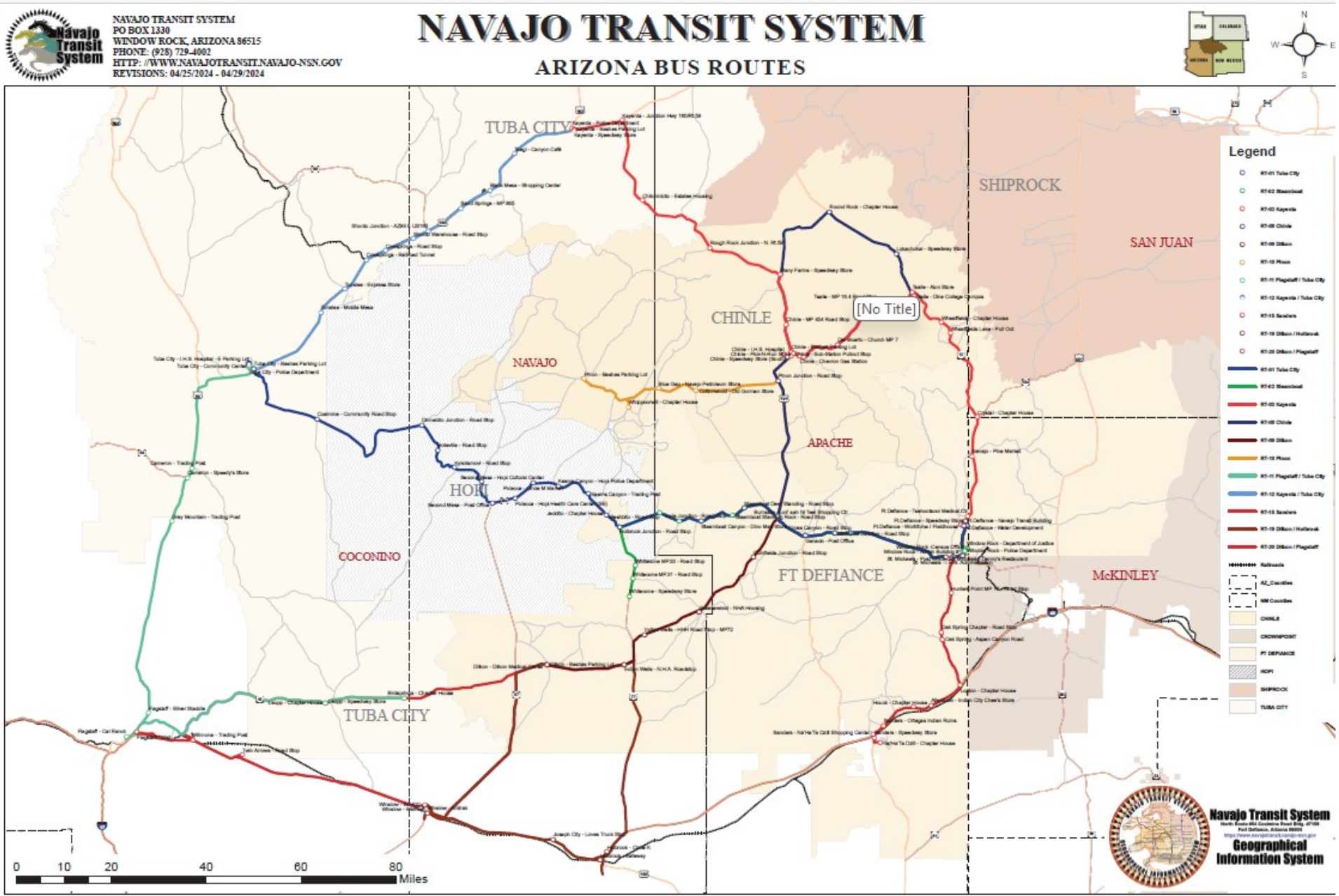




- Dr. Joanie Buckley –First Nations Development Institute (Oneida Nation)
- Calvin Castillo – Transit Manager, Navajo Nation
- Todd Morris – Senior Mobility Manager, Northern Arizona Council of Governments (NACOG)
- Paulette Butterfly – Blackfeet Planning Director, Blackfeet Nation
- Sarah Converse – Executive Director, Sweetgrass Development
- Mystic Cournoyer ExecMPA – Economic Development and Trust Fund Director, Yankton Sioux Tribe

Navajo Nation

Navajo Transit System
GREAT SEAL OF THE NAVAJO NATION
Mission Statement
Providing a Safe & Affordable
Public Transportation Operations
[No Title]
NAVAJO TRANSIT SYSTEM


NAVAJO TRANSIT SYSTEM
PO BOX 1330
WINDOW ROCK, ARIZONA 86515
PHONE: (928) 729-4002
HTTP: //WWW.NAVAJOTRANSIT.NAVAJO-NSN.GOV
REVISIONS: 04/25/2024 - 04/29/2024
NAVAJO TRANSIT SYSTEM
ARIZONA BUS ROUTES
TUBA CITY
SHIPROCK
SAN JUAN
CHINLE
[No Title]
NAVAJO
APACHE
HOPI
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McKINLEY
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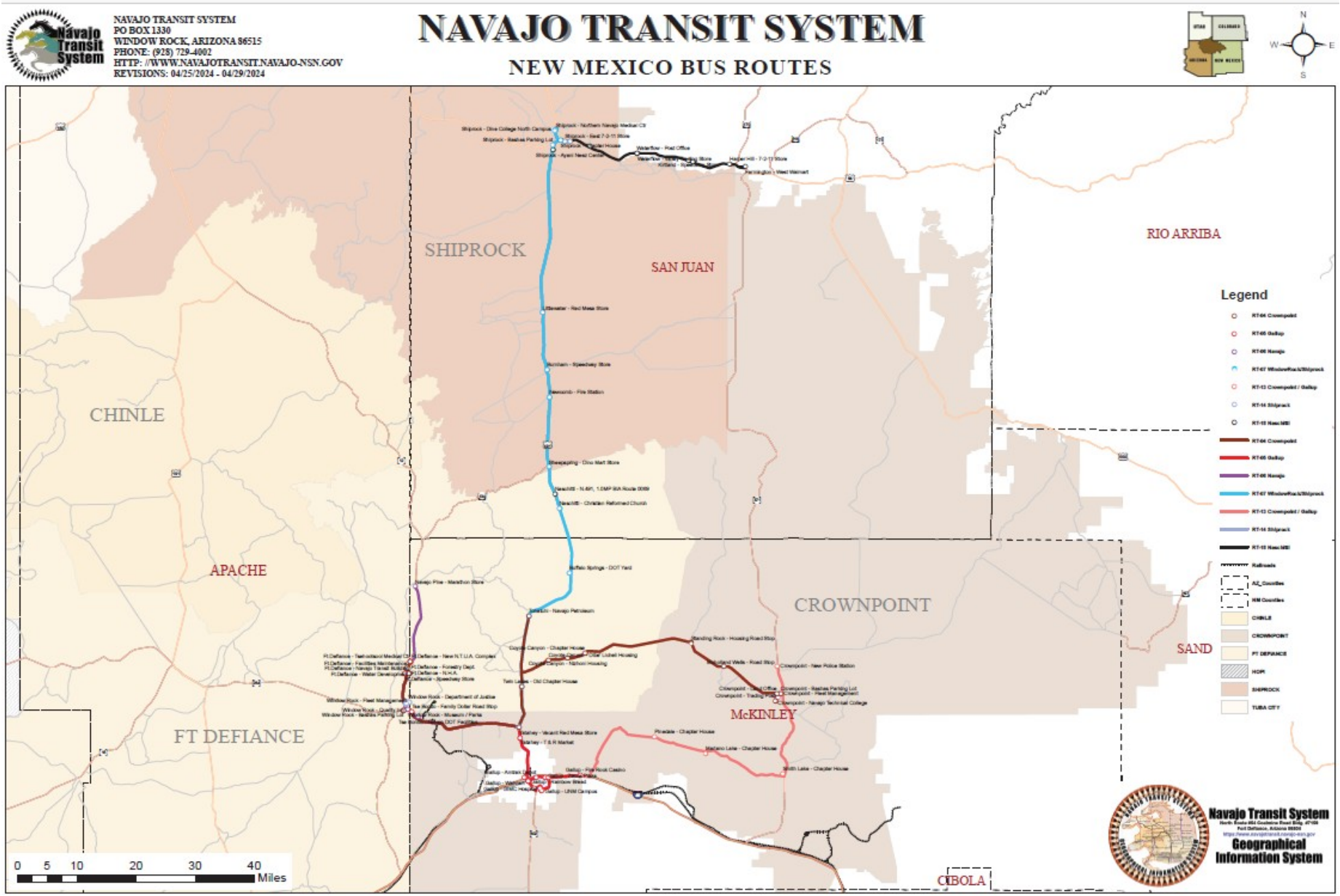
Miles
Navajo Transit System
Geographical Information System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RIO ARRIBA
CHINLE
APACHE
CROWNPOINT
FT DEFIANCE
McKINLEY
SAND
CIBOLA
Legend
Railroads
AZ_Counties
NM Counties
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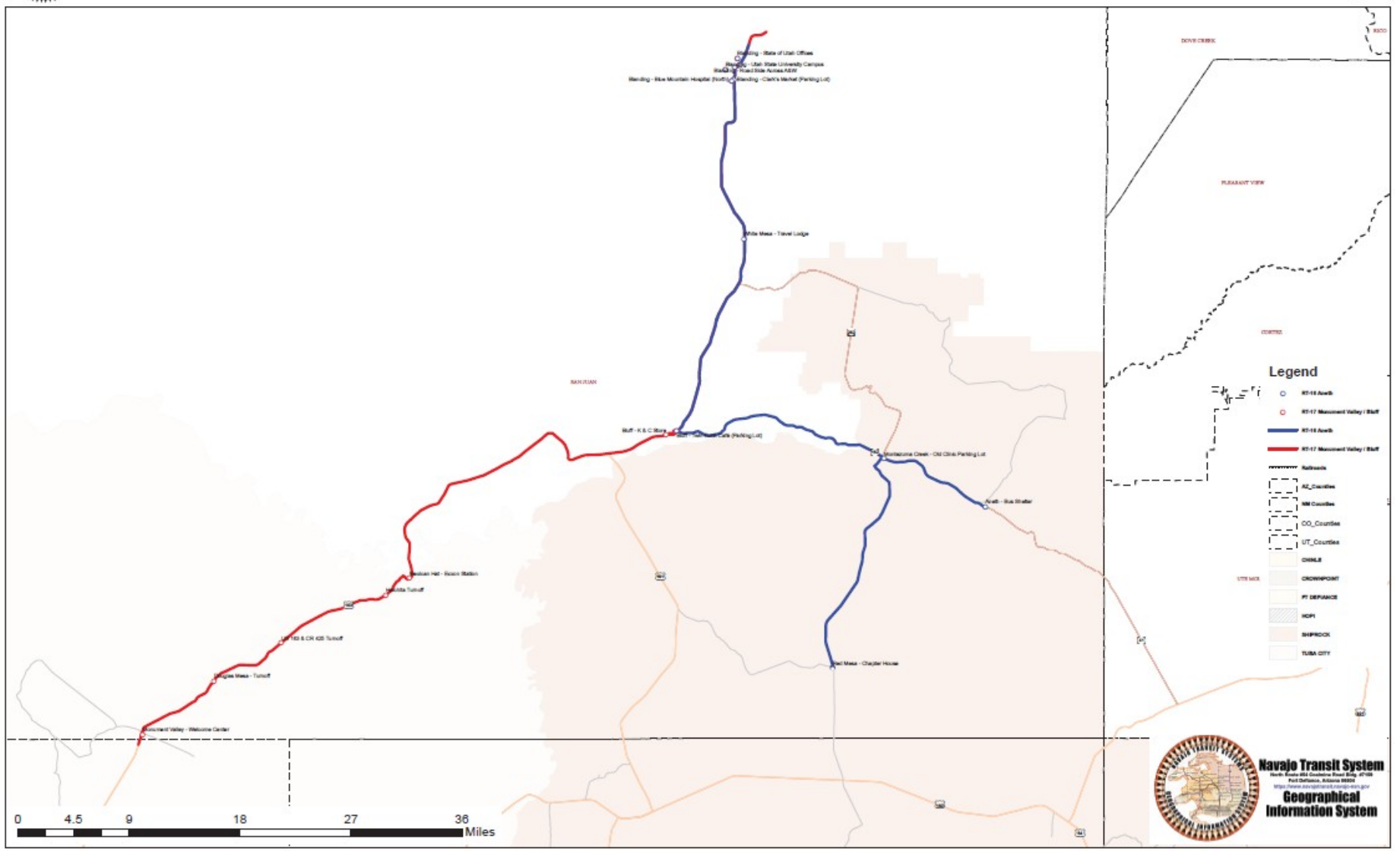
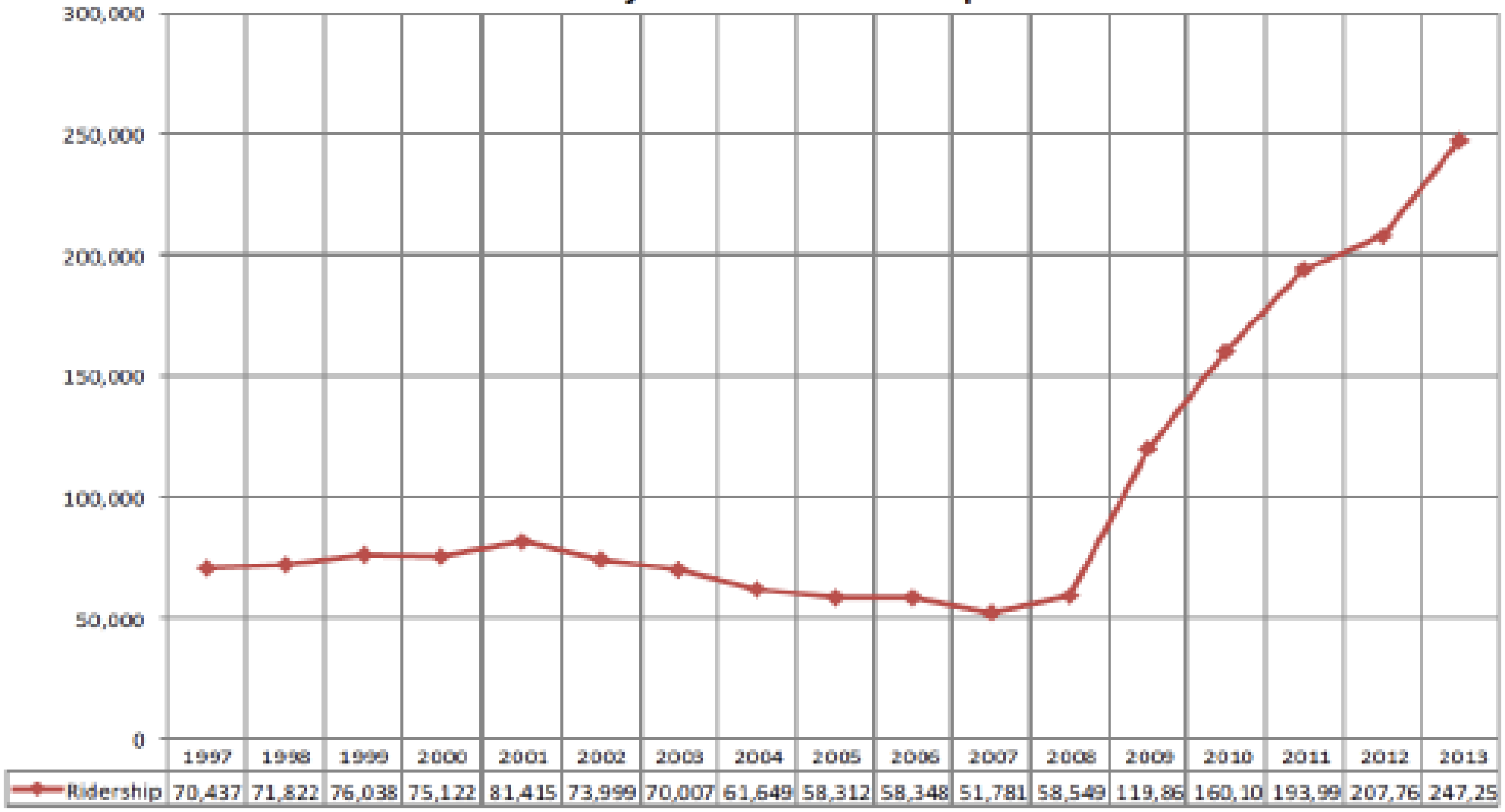
NAVAJO TRANSIT SYSTEM

UTAH BUS ROUTES



Navajo Transit Ridership



	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Ridership	70,437	71,822	76,038	75,122	81,415	73,999	70,007	61,649	58,312	58,348	51,781	58,549	119,86	160,10	193,99	207,76	247,25

Navajo Transit System
Public Transportation

1-866-243-6260
www.navajotransit.com

TRANSIT PLANNING AS A PATHWAY TO PARTNERSHIP

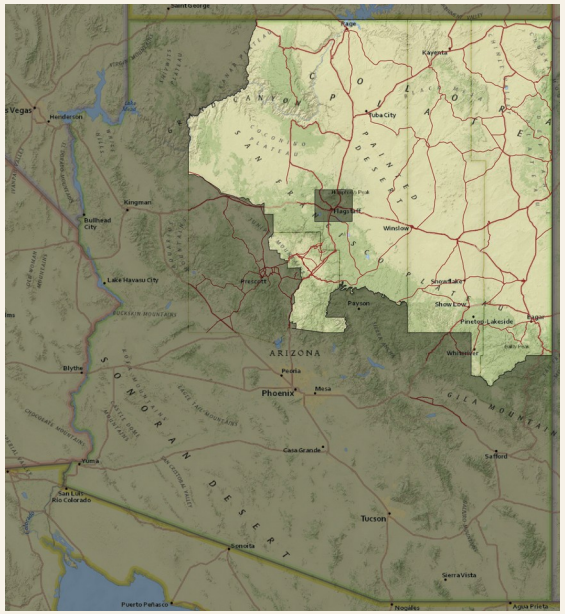
How a transit planning project created a connection between NACOG and the Navajo Nation

NADO EDD–Tribal Engagement |Tod Morris- NACOG

Who NACOG is, and where transportation fits

A regional organization operating across 4 northern Arizona counties.

NACOG Service Area



Navajo Nation

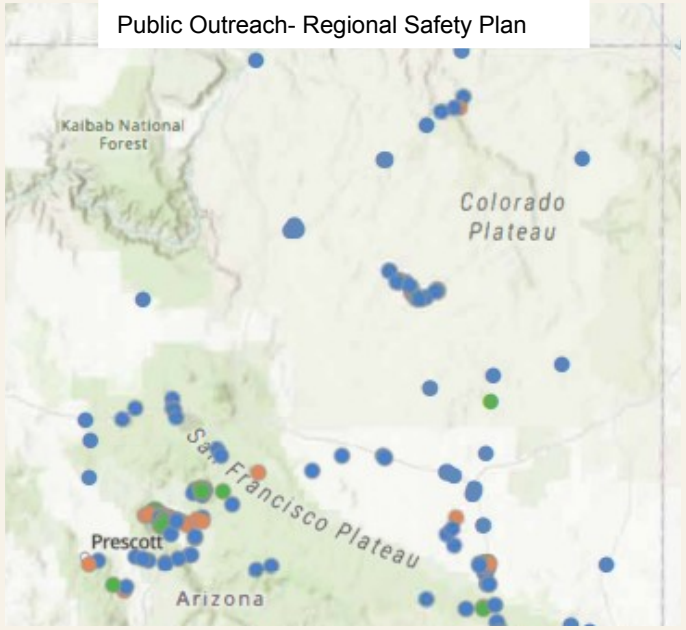
4 counties — Apache • Coconino • Navajo • Yavapai

Regional forum — Transportation, economic development, aging, housing, Head Start + more

Transportation role — Regional planning outside Flagstaff and Prescott metropolitan areas, Roadway & Transit

Sharing a region does not automatically create a partnership

The challenge was not repairing a damaged relationship. It was creating an institutional connection where little routine interaction existed.



PROXIMITY ≠ PARTNERSHIP

SOVEREIGNTY

Tribal governments are sovereign governments, not simply another local jurisdiction.

LIMITED ROUTINE CONTACT

NACOG historically had few institutional pathways with the Navajo Nation beyond transportation.

COLLABORATION GOALS

The goal is government-to-government relationship building, not ordinary stakeholder outreach.

NACOG's Commitment to Strengthening Tribal Partnerships

Recognition of Tribal Partnerships Impact on Region/Organization

Internal Strategic Goals

Strengthen Tribal Partnerships- apart of every annual Strategic Planning Meeting

Strategic Projects

NACOG has long list of big picture projects

Ready to Respond

Traditionally been quick to pick up the phone, jump in where needed

Refine Approach

Lots of needs- Ensure projects align with regional obligations/priorities

Decision-Making Process for Roadway and Transit Requests

Purpose of Form: To provide justification to the requestor of why we selected or did not choose to take on their project; and for internal planning and prioritization. The goal is for the Planning Team to be equitable in our

Evaluation Critera	(Mark The Box That Best) Low	Medium	High	
Regional Benefit and Impact				
Would the project have a significant impact on the requestor? (e.g. community benefit)				
Would the project have a regional benefit, supporting multiple jurisdictions or communities?				
Is the request either coming from ADOT or encouraged by ADOT (district office, MPD, transit)?				
Does the project bring safety benefits?				
Does the project leverage the requestor's ability to apply for state or federal grant funds?				
Does the project advance a regional priority within the TIP?				
Have all other potential project managers (other LPAs or ADOT) been vetted?				
Is the timing right?				
Is the project complimentary of the past, current, or future projects in the region?				
Has NACOG spent more time in the region, as compared to other regions? If so, should NACOG turn its attention				10
Reviewer Comments:				

Evaluation Critera	(Mark The Box That Best) Low	Medium	High	
NACOG Benefit and Impact				
Does it advance or align with a NACOG priority:				
Fostering tribal partnerships				
Enhancing safety				
Improving use of transit technology				
Vulnerable road users				
Maximizing use of available funding - grants, public-private partnerships, etc.				
NACOG's Work Program [as agreed upon by NACOG and ADOT]				
Does the project bring funding to NACOG for its administrative support?				
What level of engagement, participation, and follow-through does NACOG expect from the requestor?				
Has the requestor demonstrated a successful partnership with NACOG or other organizations in the past?				
Does the project align with NACOG staff's expertise?				
Does NACOG want the project/activity more than the partner?				11
Reviewer Comments:				

Evaluation Critera	(Mark The Box That Best) High	Medium	Low	
NACOG Capacity and Cost				
Will NACOG be required to provide cash or grant funds to conduct the project?				
What level of time commitment would the project require of the NACOG Planning Team?				
What level of time commitment would the project require of the NACOG Finance and other Teams?				3
Reviewer Comments:				
Total number of marks per this column				24

Additional questions to consider

Does NACOG want to seek out projects or just evaluate them as they are submitted?

Does NACOG want to use its unincumbered funds to manage and pursue these projects?

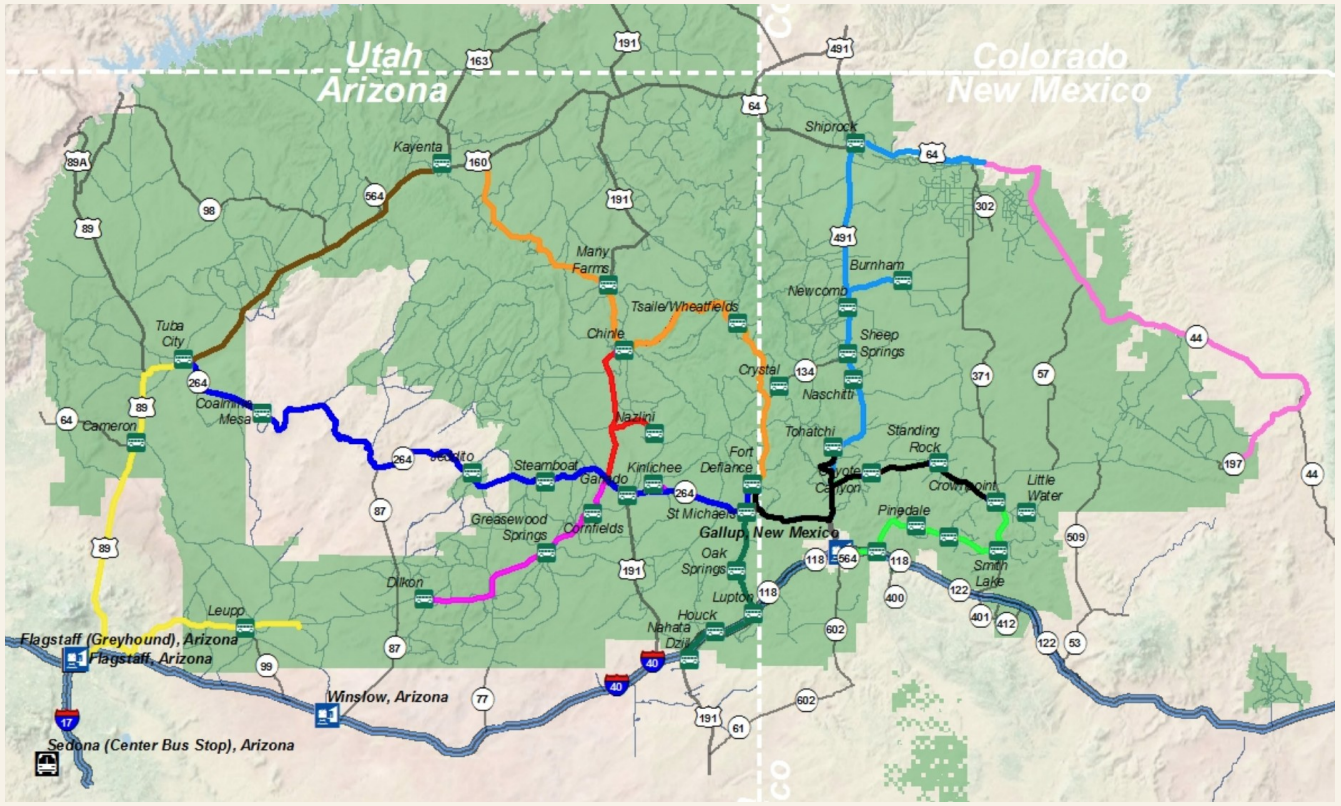
Recognize it's a fluid process. Needs individual relationships to establish foundation

NACOG successes- Legislative Outreach

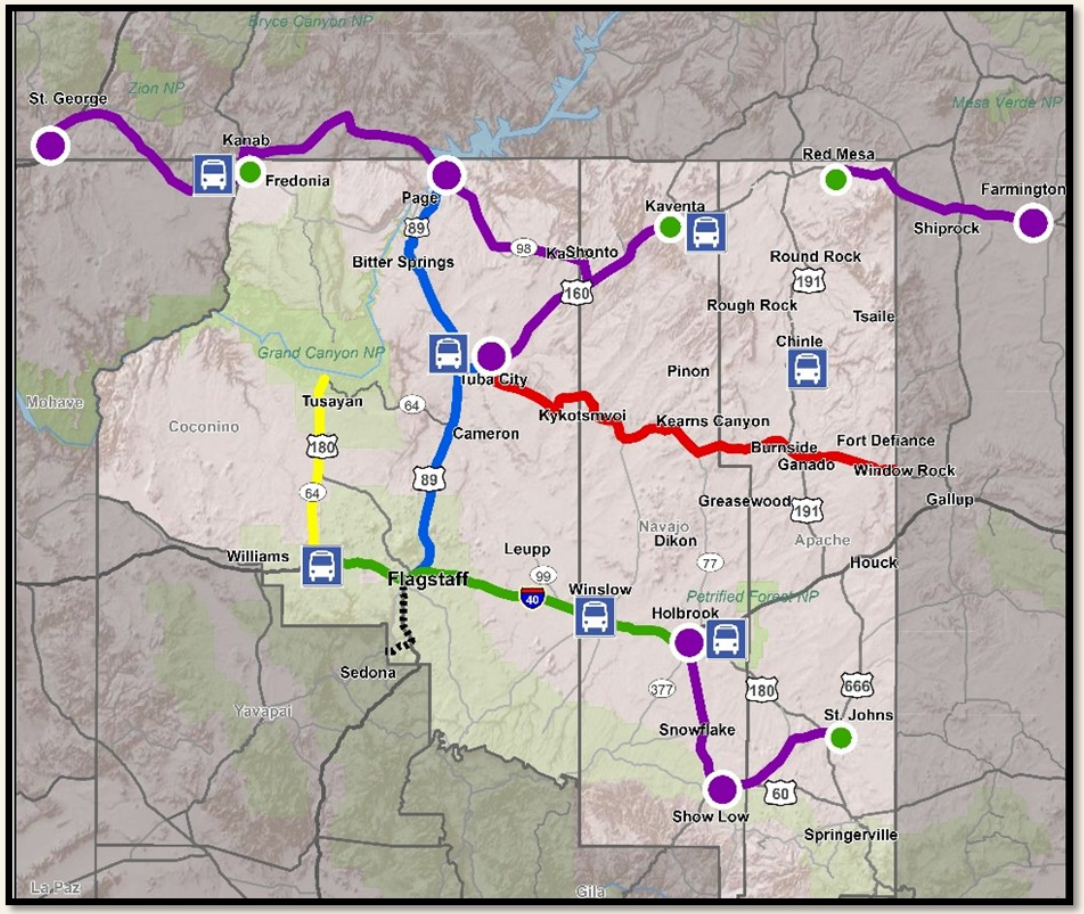
Regional Priority Projects List= Avenue for Tribal Engagement

Transit as a regional connector

Navajo Transit



2018 Passenger Transportation Plan Recommendations

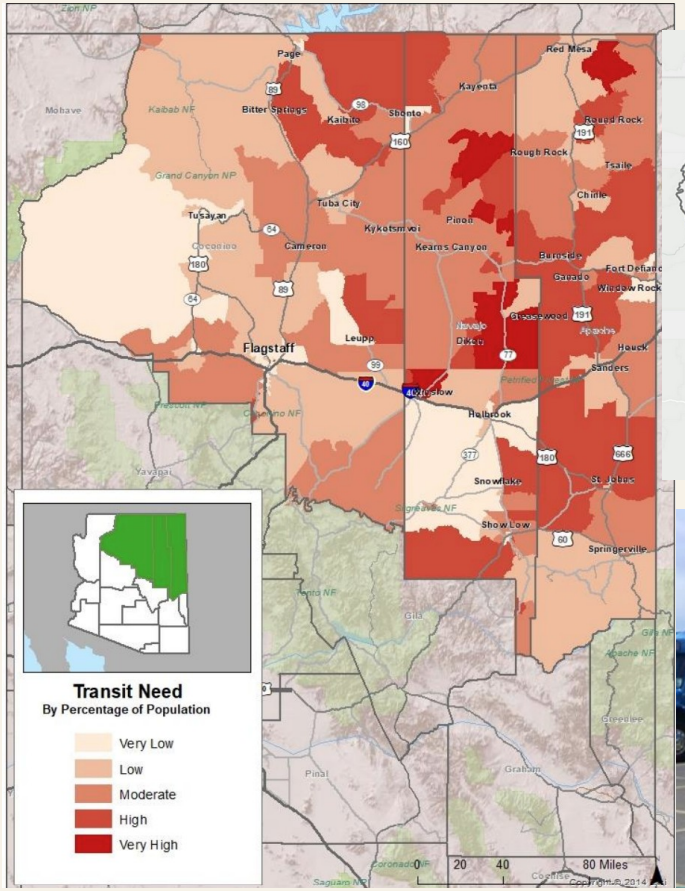


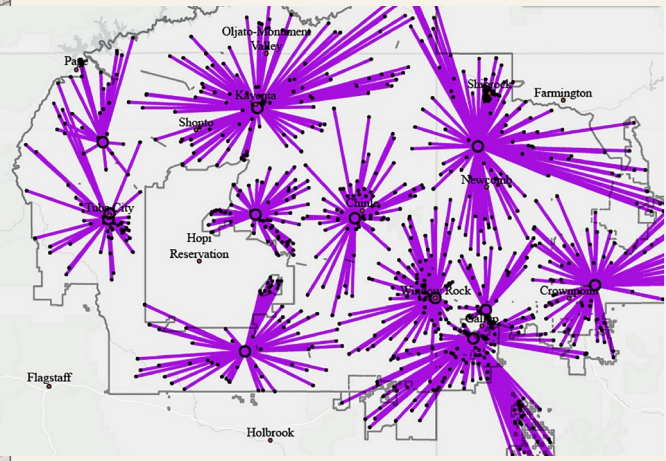
Transit created a practical reason to work together

A defined project turned an abstract goal of “building a relationship” into applicable and needed project.

Lead with usefulness, not with a request for partnership.

01	**A real need**	Navajo Transit had a concrete planning need.
02	**A useful role**	NACOG could bring planning resources, project management and regional connections.
03	**Repeated contact**	A planning process creates recurring conversations instead of a single outreach meeting.





Hopi Transit Plan demonstrated a path

The 2022 Hopi Transit Plan created continuity, familiarity and a stronger transportation partnership today between NACOG & Hopi Tribe.

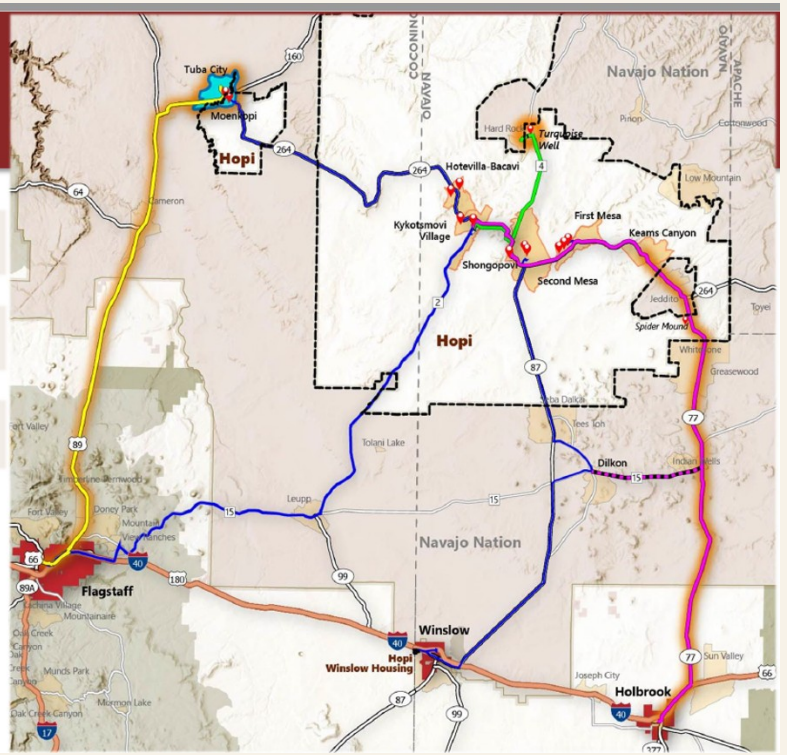
Public Engagement

Four Public "Meetings on a Bus" — Over **100** direct engagements

Rider and General Public Surveys — Over **200** filled out – an excellent return

The needs are coming into focus:
- Local service coverage is good – the frequency needs to be increased.
- More service to Flagstaff and Winslow. Twin Arrows and Holbrook were also seen as a need.

Potential Full Buildout



The Hopi Transit Plan created a repeatable pathway for trust to develop through the work.

Consistent Presence

- Nearly 10 years out in the region
- Intentionally seeking out relationships
- Active attendance & involvement in tribal meetings

Long road to get here. Now real work starts

Development of Strategies and Recommendations

Based on the findings of Tasks 1 through 7:

1. Establish existing conditions, operational constraints, community desires, and service needs.
2. Develop a range of alternative strategies, including route optimization and phased restoration.
3. Evaluate alternatives based on workforce, fleet, facilities, funding, and organizational capacity.
4. Review priorities with NTS, Navajo DOT, tribal leadership, partners, and communities.
5. Develop practical recommendations and a detailed Five-Year Implementation Roadmap.

10

Public & Tribal Engagement That Reaches All 110 Chapters

- Flexible and meaningful engagement plan → Understanding expectations, shaping priorities and building support
- Multiple staff on site → KFH Group, Socius Amica & The Navigation Firm
- Wide variety of stakeholders → coordinated with NACOG, Navajo DOT, NTS leadership, tribal liaisons and Chapter Houses
- Minimum 3 rounds of outreach → In the initial phases – to understand needs, issues and concerns → During the selection of strategies to advise → Draft final plan
- Variety of methods → Low Tech → No Tech → Diné Bizaad translators and materials where appropriate

Meeting on a Bus, Tuba City

8

Sustainability, Workforce and Technology

WORKFORCE	TECHNOLOGY	FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY
Diagnose recruitment, hiring, background-check, CDL, compensation, training, retention, deployment, and succession issues.	Prioritize scheduling and dispatch, AVL, passenger counting, fare collection, GTFS, real-time information, and reporting tools that fit connectivity constraints.	Align phased service restoration with operating grants, capital needs, organizational capacity, and a realistic five-year financial outlook.

11

Regional Coordination, Connectivity & Partnership Development

NTS has a regional role that extends beyond individual routes. We will work with neighboring tribes | transit systems | municipalities | MPOs and COGs | education and healthcare partners | human services organizations **to identify practical opportunities.**

12

From project to partnership

A 20 month-long planning process gives both organizations time to move beyond introductions and into working relationships.

Consensus on Navajo Transit role in the region

NACOG in position to support plan implementation

Navajo Transit becomes leader in region and available supports other 5311s

More connected region, benefitting all rider groups

The important outcome is not only a plan. It is institutional memory, staff-to-staff familiarity and a reason to collaborate again.

Make sure the next collaboration does not start from zero

The relationship can support future coordination while remaining responsive to Navajo Nation priorities.

- NACOG's value is demonstrated to Navajo Nation
- Navajo Nation understands role of NACOG as resource to members but also serve a convener with Navajo Nation governments, State/Fed depts, and surrounding communities
- Move towards partnerships beyond transportation & consider economic development strategies

NACOG role is not to predefine the next partnership. It is to be ready when collaboration is useful.

Five steps other regional organizations can use

Partnership is a long game. A well-chosen project can be the first step.

1. **Start with a real need** — Find a project with genuine shared value.
2. **Lead with value** — Support Tribal priorities instead of only seeking participation in yours.
3. **Respect sovereignty & educate yourself** — Treat engagement as a relationship between governments.
4. **Give it time** — Repeated interaction builds familiarity and trust.
5. **Think past the deliverable** — Design the project so the relationship can continue.

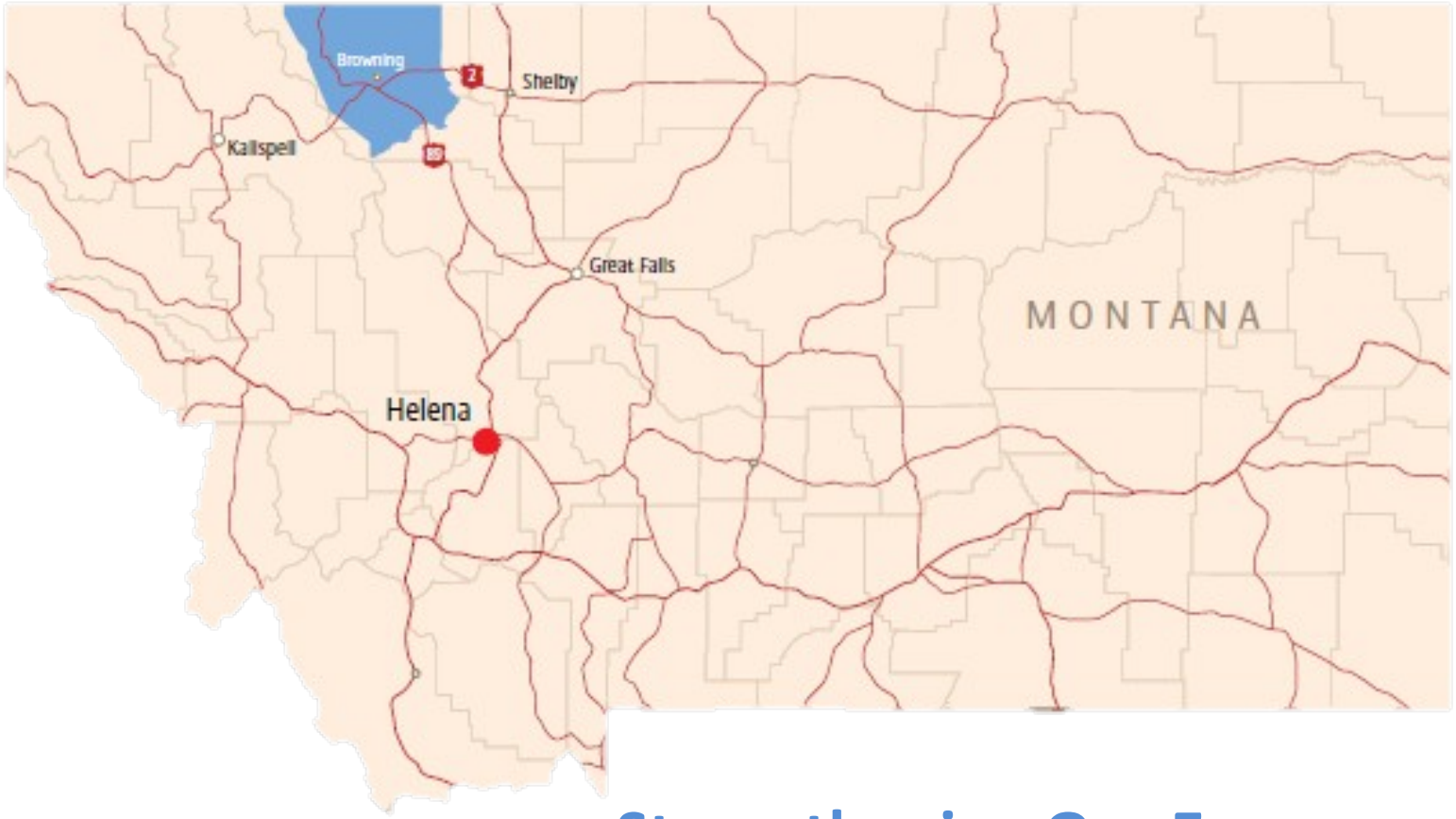
**START WITH A PROJECT.
BUILD A RELATIONSHIP.
KEEP SHOWING UP.**

Blackfeet Nation

BLACKFEET
NATION

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

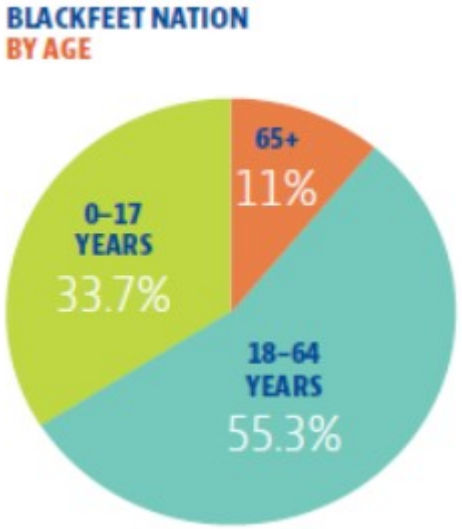
2025–2026



Strengthening Our Economy Through Partnerships As the Foundation of our CEDS

The Reservation is home to 56% of the enrolled Tribal Members and is the largest Indian population in Montana

Building a stronger, self-sustaining Tribal economy while maintaining our values, culture, and sovereignty



Economic Development Goals

Business Growth
Support Tribal entrepreneurs, small businesses and tourism
Infrastructure
Improve water, roads, utilities, broadband and facilities
Workforce
Expand training, education and employment opportunities
Community Development
Support housing, public spaces and community well-being
Identify Partnerships
To move from strategic planning to actual economic development
Identify priority projects & assigning responsibility, identify funding, & measuring results

Partnerships are the Foundation of Our CEDS

1. provide the ability to accomplish the work.
2. Internal, External & Regional Partnerships help to build capacity to plan, develop, fund, and implement our projects.
3. Improve project readiness & funding coordination
4. Build Tribal planning and grant management capacity
5. Assist in expanding Tribal businesses & workforce opportunities to benefit future generations
6. Opportunity to share lessons and successful strategies for sustainability

Our Commitment To Working Together

Proposed next steps:
1. Confirm departmental CEDS responsibilities.
2. Identify each department's priority projects.
3. Assign lead and supporting partners.
4. Establish quarterly reporting.
5. Review progress with Tribal Council & Partners
6. Blackfeet Planning will continue to serve as a coordinator, with Tribal departments, agencies, businesses, organizations, & with existing and new Partnerships

PARTNER	CONTRIBUTION
Blackfeet Tribal Business Council	Leadership, policy, direction, and approval of Tribal Priorities
Tribal Departments & Programs	Project Development, coordination, implementation, and reporting
Sweetgrass Development	Regional economic development coordination and technical assistance
Montana Department of Commerce	Grant opportunity, Tourism Development Grant program, awarded Tribe $2.7M grant
Economic Development Administration (EDA)	EDA funding and planning support for CEDS
Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA)	Technical assistance and eligible tribal development programs, and funding of Tribal Planning Department
Blackfeet Community College	Education, workforce development, and training
Local businesses & Entrepreneurs	Job Creation, private investments, and business development
Community Members	Local knowledge, community priorities, and project feedback
Montana State University Extension Office	Reimagining Rural Communities through Beautification, Wayfinding and funding contributions
Browning Public School District #9	Community Support and student involvement
Global Volunteers of America	Short-term volunteers to support long-term, community led human and economic development projects
The National Center for American Indian Enterprise Development (NCAIED)	501©(3) non-profit dedicated to advancing tribal economies, Native owned businesses, and indigenous entrepreneurs, business growth & government contracting, economic accelerator, business development & Capital Access
Center for Rural Outreach & Public Services, Inc.	501©(3) Cross Cultural training, Facilitation of CEDS development Retreat, Strategic Planning And Fund Development

CEDS

Chairman Terry Tatsey
Blackfeet Tribal Business Council

2026 CEDS

GOAL 1

ADDRESS WATER & WASTEWATER INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS TO ADDRESS QUALITY OF LIFE AND COMMUNITY FACILITY DEVELOPMENT

GOAL 2

DEVELOP/CONSTRUCT A NEW ELDER CARE CENTER

GOAL 3

DEVELOP/CONSTRUCT A COMMUNITY WELLNESS CENTER

GOAL 4

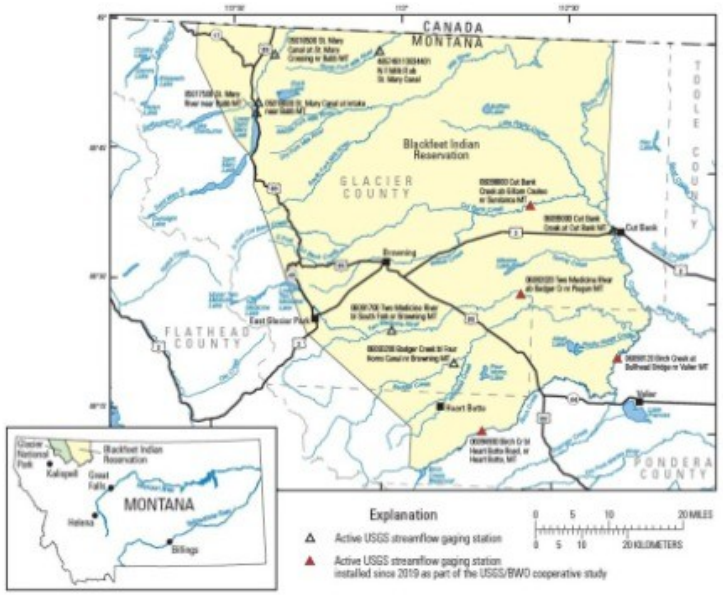
ADDRESS PUBLIC SAFETY THROUGH ADDRESSING THE TRIBAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

GOAL 5

ADD HOUSING STOCK, WORKING TO ADDRESS SPECIFIC HOUSING NEEDS

GOAL 6

INCREASE VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES, MAKING TOURISM A PRIMARY ECONOMIC DRIVER FOR THE TRIBE



SWEETGRASS DEVELOPMENT

WHO ARE WE?

- Established in 2004
- Federally funded **E**conomic **D**evelopment **D**istrict (EDD)
- State funded **C**ertified **R**egional **D**evelopment **C**orporation (CRDC)

WHAT DO WE DO?

- Grant information and assistance
- Project development and management
- Technical assistance for businesses
- **R**evolving **L**oan **F**und (RLF)
- Brownfields program

Grant Awards

US EPA Brownfields Grant Awards

Awarded in 2015

- $400,000 Assessment

Awarded in 2020

- $300,000 Assessment

Awarded in 2023

- RLF $1 million

Awarded in 2024

- $500,000 Assessment

Sweetgrass Development Brownfields Program

Sites Assessed within the Blackfeet Reservation Boundaries

Big Sky Standard
Petroleum and asbestos. No Further Action letter (NFA). Redevelopment

Jim's Bulk Plant
Petroleum. Located wells under DEQ enforcement, NFA received.

Corner Grocery
Asbestos and petroleum. Testing occurred for demolition and the business plans to demolish when they have funding.

Former Napa Store
Asbestos and Petroleum. Located wells under DEQ enforcement, NFA received. Testing for sale and possible redevelopment.

Sears Motel (EGP)
Petroleum and Asbestos, in process

Browning Library
Asbestos, in process

Yankton Sioux Tribe

Mystic Cournoyer

Development Trust Fund /Economic Development Director

Yankton Sioux Tribe

Any
QUESTIONS?

London Weier

Program Manager
NADO

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NADO Research Foundation

EDD CoP
Economic Development District
Community of Practice

Resources

NADO & FNDI Tribal Engagement

nado.org/tribal-engagement-resources/

- EDD-Tribe Interactive Map
- Case studies of joint projects and engagement approaches
- Reports: Tribal EcDev Perspectives; Engagement 101 for RDOs
- Webinar recordings; external links

EDD CoP

Economic Development District
Community of Practice

NADO Research Foundation

E·D·A
U.S. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ADMINISTRATION

More info at: www.nado.org/EDDCoP

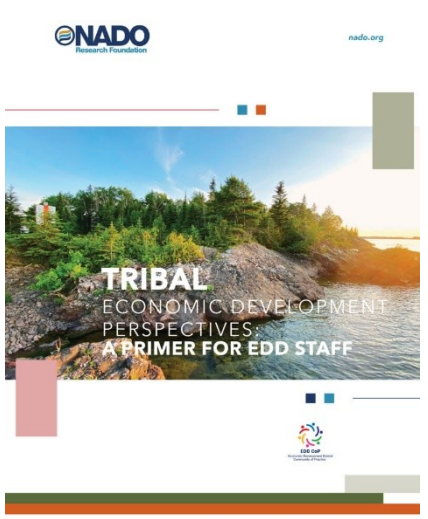
This session is offered through the Economic Development District Community of Practice (EDD CoP), managed by the NADO Research Foundation to build the capacity of the national network of EDDs. To learn more, visit: www.nado.org/EDDCoP. The EDD CoP is made possible through an award from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce (ED22HDQ3070106). The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations in this webinar are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Economic Development Administration or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

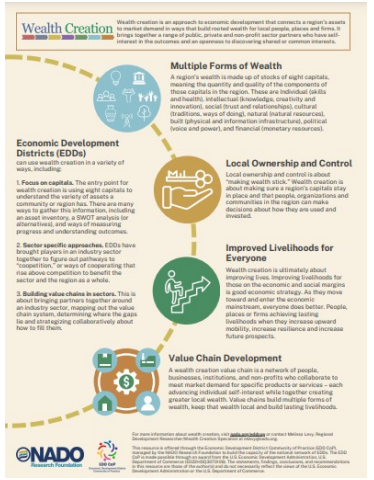
The State of the EDDs & CEDS Content Guidelines Updates (June 2023)

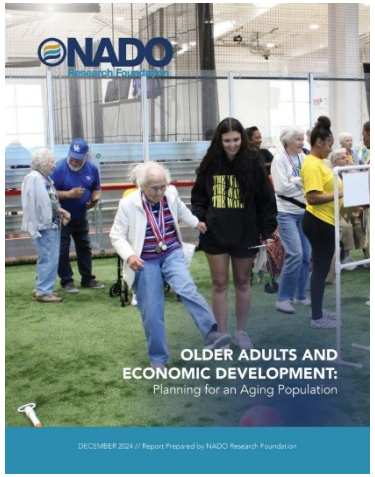
In the spring of 2023, the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA) designated its 400th Economic Development District (EDD) and also released updates to its Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS) Content Guidelines. This webinar briefing provides a reflection on the state of the national network of EDDs and information about the updated CEDS Content Guidelines that highlight equity, climate resilience, and workforce development. Presentation slides are available here (PDF).

CEDS 101: What You Need to Know Right Now About the CEDS (March 2021)

During this webinar, staff from the U.S. Economic Development Administration, NADO Research Foundation, and Southeast Conference (AK) covered CEDS fundamentals, best practices, and latest trends. The session is intended primarily for new staff working on the CEDS, though it may also be of interest as a refresher for CEDS veterans. Presentation slides are available here (PDF).







HAZARD MITIGATION &
CEDS INTEGRATION

TIP SHEET

NADO Research Foundation

Wisdom from the Field:
10 Practical Tips for EDD Staff to Improve Projects and Programs

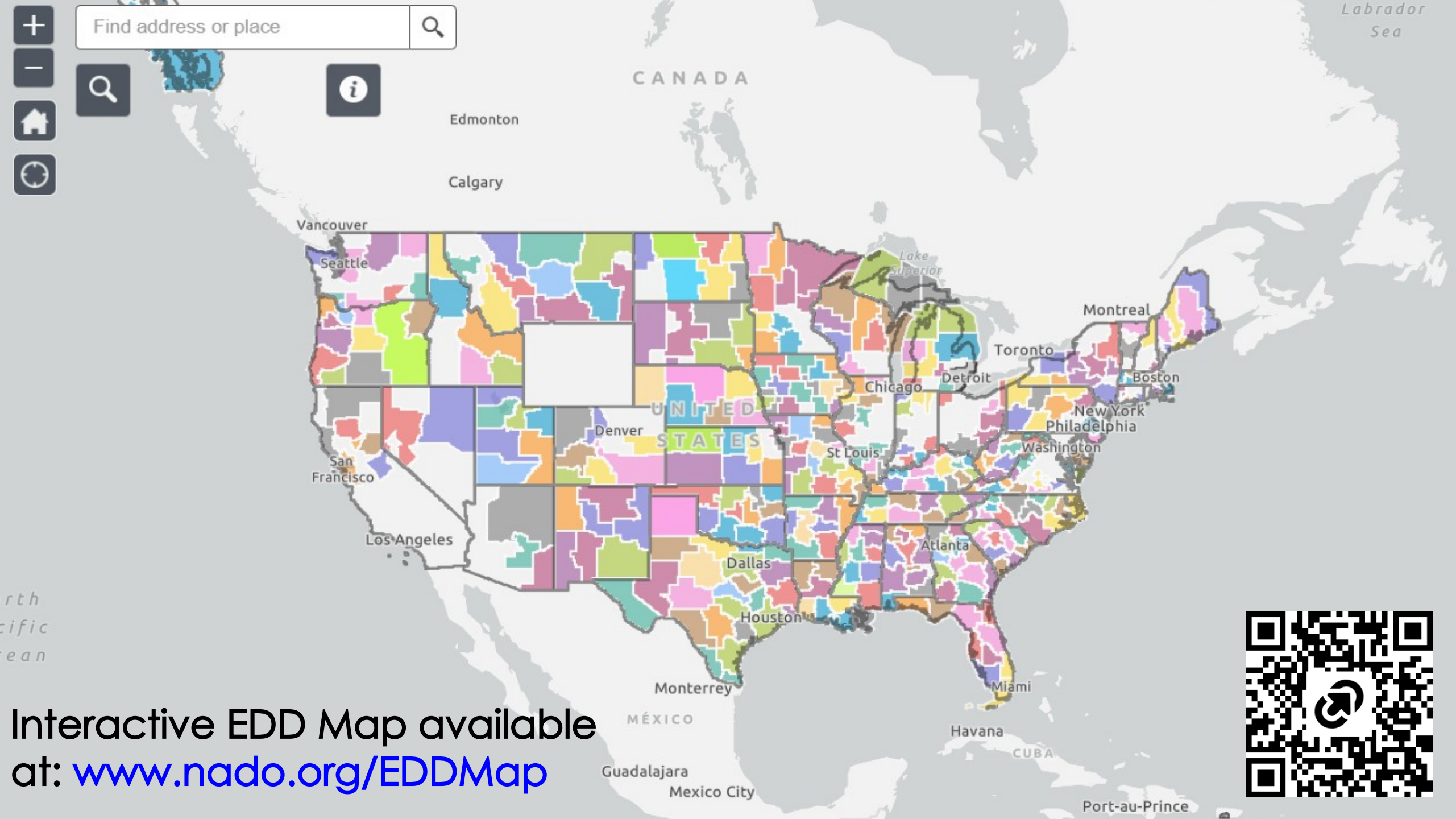
No one ever said doing regional economic development was easy. Whether navigating complex partnerships, aligning diverse community needs, or securing the right resources, EDD staff routinely face a wide range of challenges in their efforts to drive meaningful change. While there's no single roadmap for success, one of the best ways to chart a path forward is by learning from peers who've tackled similar hurdles.

This resource shares ten pieces of advice from Economic Development District staff whose 2025 NADO Impact Award-winning projects show how vision, planning, and collaboration can lead to meaningful results. These insights offer practical guidance for moving initiatives from concept to completion, reflecting the creativity, determination, and problem-solving needed to advance economic and community development. Whether you're starting a new effort or working to complete an existing one, these lessons provide real-world encouragement from those who've successfully navigated the path.

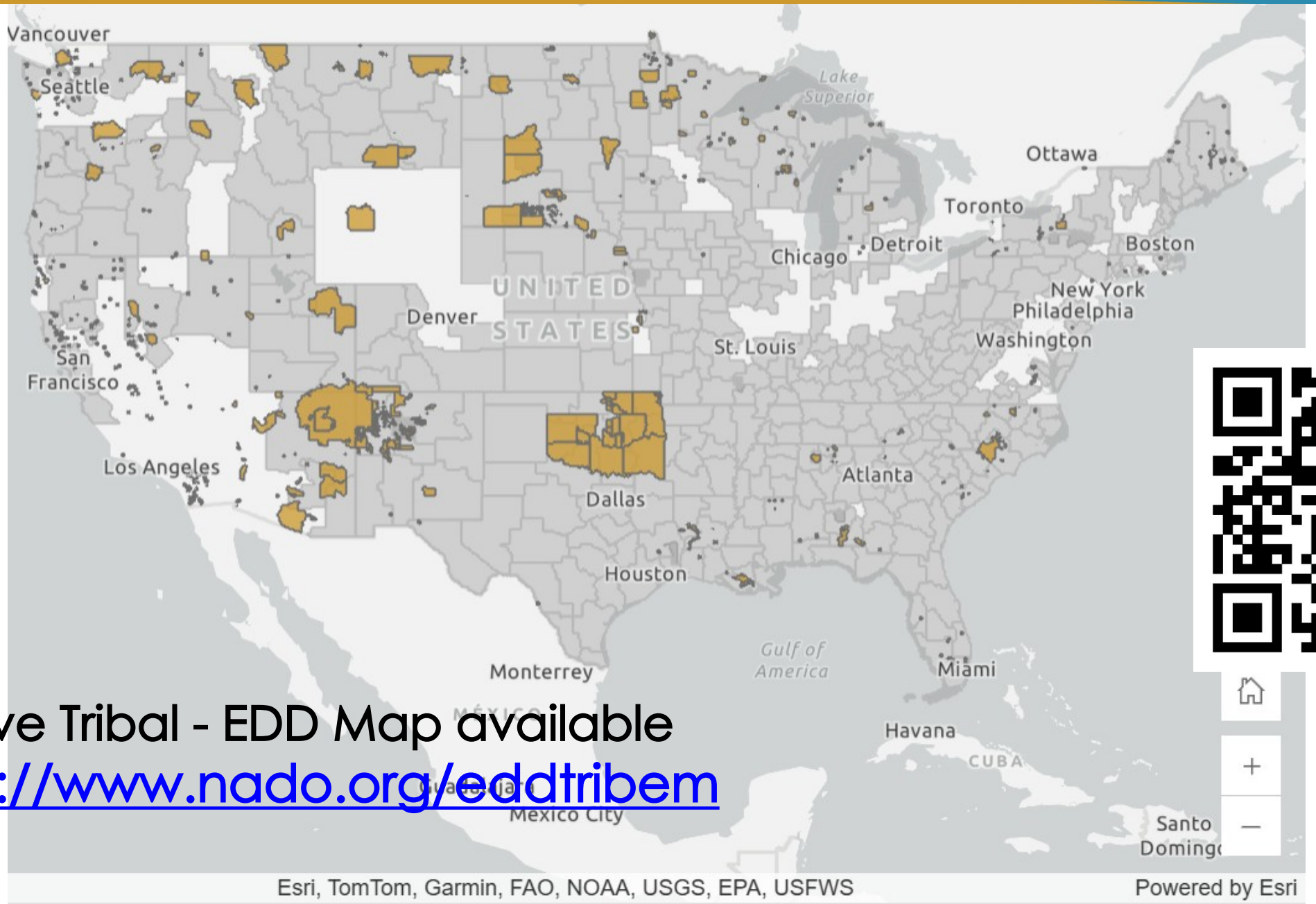
NADO Research Foundation

September 2025

Visit: www.nado.org/EDDC



Interactive EDD Map available at: www.nado.org/EDDMap



Interactive Tribal - EDD Map available at: https://www.nado.org/eddtribemap/

Session Walk-a-ways:

- Importance of meaningful tribal partnerships and collaborations for regional prosperity
- Vision and approaches for economic development initiatives
- Open discussions, sharing knowledge as Community of Practice (CoP) professionals

Any other specific walk-a-way from the audience?

Engaging with Tribal Partners

- "Meaningful" partnership
- Open mind and good heart
- Respect and humility
- Research / Preparation
- Cultural protocols
- Understand Sovereignty, treaties, lands, environment

- 7th Generation Philosophy

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EDD CoP
Economic Development District
Community of Practice