

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA Agriculture and Natural Resources

Humboldt CED Needs Assessment

Alec Dompka



[Humboldt County](#) sits near the top of Ca on the coast

Executive Summary

This report documents the needs of the Humboldt CED advisor's clientele. It also examines CED needs and priorities so the advisor's responses address areas they will have the most impact and fulfill the goals of UC ANR. This report uses secondary sources ranging from local economic development agency reports to statistics from federal agencies and 24 interviews conducted by the advisor in late 2024. Candidates were chosen by the advisor with input to represent the diverse interests and stakeholder groups in Humboldt.

The area is rural and rugged; outdoor recreation tourism and timber are large industries. The area's abundant rain supports agriculture, and there is a productive multispecies fishery. Humboldt is struggling with the legacy of the boom and bust industry that endures until today. Mining, logging, and cannabis have all come and greatly contracted to varying degrees. These former key industries have hit rural areas such as southern Humboldt hardest and left a workforce not well suited for the fewer jobs now available. Humboldt is trying to identify what the next generation of key industries will be and how to develop them in a sustainable way to avoid the boom and bust cycles.

Humboldt has an entrepreneurial spirit and some infrastructure to support this. These are assets to the region. Professional workers, especially young workers, are mobile and interested in cultural amenities. Humboldt offers these amenities and sets goals of supporting the arts sector.

Humboldt has high poverty rates, low median incomes, and generally poor socioeconomic and demographic statistics. Rates of food insecurity are high, and many residents are far from services or stores. Humboldt has had sub-5 % unemployment since January 2022. There are shortages of workers across the board, especially in higher-paying positions, where the area has the most significant wage gap with the rest of the state. Workforce development is word one when talking about CED in Humboldt. With the demise of key industries mentioned above, there is a working-age workforce in need of services to secure living wage jobs.

The Redwood coast has a much higher cost of living to income ratio of 97.0% than that of California, 88.7%. Businesses must find unique ways to navigate the limited local market, especially for consumer goods and the shipping challenges that Humboldt's infrastructure and terrain present. Financing can be challenging for businesses and nonprofits, staff time is limited, and options for capital can be limited compared to urban areas. Humboldt's Per Capita GDP grew slightly slower than the North Coast region from 2001-2021, but it is still the highest, followed closely by Mendocino County.

Housing and infrastructure deficiencies hinder business growth and workforce development. Industry groups, especially in agriculture, are forming to fill the need for infrastructure improvements.

Data and training needs

Accurate, timely data, projection, and analysis will be key to addressing these needs and effectively leveraging these assets. The county, especially rural areas, suffers from data gaps. There is a need and clientele desire for acute socioeconomic data on every community in the county. The lack of forward projection for socioeconomic indicators and industry sector data is a roadblock to improved planning. Filling these gaps may be an effective engagement to build foundational capacity in the economic development system of Humboldt County. This kind of data work will require internal development of the CEDLab, which is currently underway.

Facilitating training is the advisor's best tool to support CED capacity building. These trainings need to meet the CED practitioner audience of Humboldt where they are and present topics that are interesting to them. This audience is often "accidental economic developers" working on 1 or 2 CED topics. The training focuses on implementing CED programs with the changing field of program per training. These trainings will focus on examples and leaving participants with a clear sense of how to start implementing the CED programs that have been identified as priorities in the community.

Fitting into Humboldt CED

Across topics, the need for greater capacity in the nonprofit and government space is a top need. From securing funds to monitoring ongoing projects, more people working on CED are needed for more hours with greater skills. The advisor's training is geared towards building capacity, which is needed most for those working in CED.

Supporting the infrastructure for ag business and food system development is a natural place for the advisor to fit into the puzzle. The region needs support on these topics from the plan to the project level. UC ANR is expanding its energy-issue capacity, and the advisor will use this to support local stakeholders on this topic.

Supporting workforce development and the precursors to a successful workforce is key to the advisor's role. Workforce development is being addressed in many other parts of UC ANR, and the advisor should use these resources. These clientele are the most interested in accurate, precise data. Workforce development work should be entered into carefully to ensure the quality and equity of job creation.

Tribal areas are vastly underserved, and the advisor was not able to interview a representative from a Tribal Nation in Humboldt. The advisor will need to build better relationships with staff working at Tribal Nations.

The region's economic drivers are changing, and informing productive uses of them will be key. The advisor can maximize their coverage by supporting traditional uses like ag business and the timber sectors alongside alternative natural resource industries like outdoor recreation tourism and green energy.

Purpose, Scope, and Structure

This report documents Humboldt County's community and economic development (CED) needs and identifies clientele needs for the Humboldt UCCE CED advisor. The information is used to develop an applied research and extension education strategy for the advisor in Humboldt County. This report explores the needs of CED clientele and the local community on a wide range of topics, some outside the traditional UC ANR scope. The report uses a Community Capitals Framework to categorize assets and needs. The report relies on a secondary data review and semi-structured clientele interviews with 24 clients.

Methods

The report organizes assets and needs using a Community Capitals Framework and explores where the advisor can leverage assets and address needs. Secondary data sources were chosen because they represent the region's most encompassing and up-to-date information on CED.

Interviewees were selected to represent the different fields contributing to economic development, focusing on organizations currently finding success and underserved communities. These interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours, taking place online or in person. Clientele interviews were conducted with questions developed with help from Aaron Wilcher, UCCE CED advisor. The boilerplate questionnaire can be found in the appendix and was customized to the interviewee's organization.

Community Capitals Framework Analysis

Natural Capital

Humboldt County's climates vary drastically, with the interior being much hotter than the coast. The region is isolated, mountainous, and has extensive forest cover, including the famous redwoods. This rugged terrain is an obstacle for things like infrastructure projects but an asset to the county's 400 million-dollar-a-year tourism industry. (1) The Humboldt climate and rain support many farming, timber, and ranching operations. The coasts off Humboldt boast strong, sustained winds and productive aquaculture.

Summary of the top crops from Humboldt County

Product(1)	Nurseries(mostly cut flowers)	Vegetable	Timber	Fruit and nut	Milk Production	Cattle (market including dairy	Cannabis
Value in Millions of \$	57.61	3.679	99.267	1.067	61.978	33.77	309.553 (from flower) (see methods on crop report)

(Table 1: Data from the 2022 Humboldt County Crop Report)

Timber

1/3 of the value of California's timber is harvested from Humboldt County. The forest product industry has an incredibly high employment concentration in Humboldt and employed 3,353 people in 2019, a slight reduction from 2009. (2) Since its heyday, the industry has shrunk dramatically; in 1955, it employed over 8700 people, with "70% of all economic activity in Humboldt County Originating directly or indirectly from timber." (12) This sector had an average annual wage of \$55,593 in 2019, well above the local average yearly wage of \$38,875. (2) Timber industry jobs often fall into a shrinking category of high-paying blue-collar jobs with lower education and training barriers to entry. The smaller timber industry has a changing face, with mass timber and biomass as emergent sub-industries. The decline of timber and cannabis leaves the region without a clear powerhouse industry or industry cluster. Local organizations and governments are still working through what the economic engine will be.

While planning may address the economy scale needs, workforce development solutions are needed to address the workers formerly employed by these shrunken industries. **Programs in this space expressed a need for improved data on program effectiveness in rural Humboldt and collaboration with educational institutions.**

Cannabis

Cannabis shows large sales values but has failed to deliver economic development for the county after legalization. (6) Cannabis growers are struggling in Southern Humboldt, and many farms have closed.

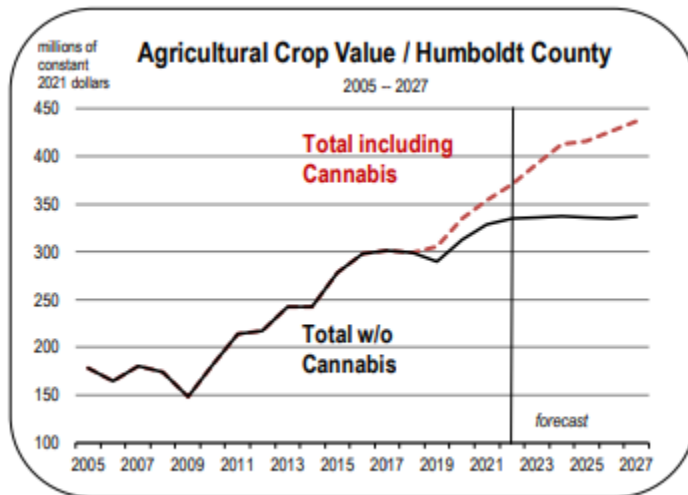


FIGURE X1: Humboldt Ag value is predicted to remain flat through 2027 without cannabis and grow sharply with its inclusion: CA DOT (7)

Ag Business and Food System

Alternative agriculture and agricultural operations mixed with light manufacturing are target sectors for growth. (3) Interviewees cited regulatory compliance and capital requirements as roadblocks to sector development. Addressing these roadblocks is vital to the industry's success. Supply chain infrastructure, especially a [lack of meat processing](#) and [cold storage facilities](#) hamstringing the region's food system. Interviews show that existing markets for small farmers are saturated. Markets must expand to cover more institutional purchases and to grow those buying direct-to-consumer. Agricultural employment added 200 jobs in 2021 but is predicted to be flat through 2027 with high uncertainty given employment's dependence on cannabis. (7)

Outdoor Recreation Tourism

Humboldt's tourism industry has multiple drivers, with the outdoors and natural assets being the key. The tourism industry created over 16% of the regional employment, with a median wage of 52% the regional median. (2) Tourism brings in outside customers for local businesses, and many specialty or small businesses rely on this market. The CEDS points to outdoor amenities as an asset in attracting and retaining the young professional workforce the area struggles to maintain. (3) Research supports this, especially when outdoor amenities are paired with an entrepreneurial environment in the community, which interviewees commonly describe Humboldt as. (4)

Cultural Capital

Humboldt is known for its culture of independence and self-reliance, influenced by its isolation and key industries. Native American culture is also critical to Humboldt County. There are 11 federally recognized or unrecognized tribal governments in the region. (13) Humboldt County recognizes its arts and culture sector as a workforce attraction and retention tool and hopes to develop long-term viability plans and centralized resources for arts and culture. (3) Arts and culture are crucial to attracting the young creative professionals Humboldt wants to attract and retain. (8,3)

Human Capital

Demographics

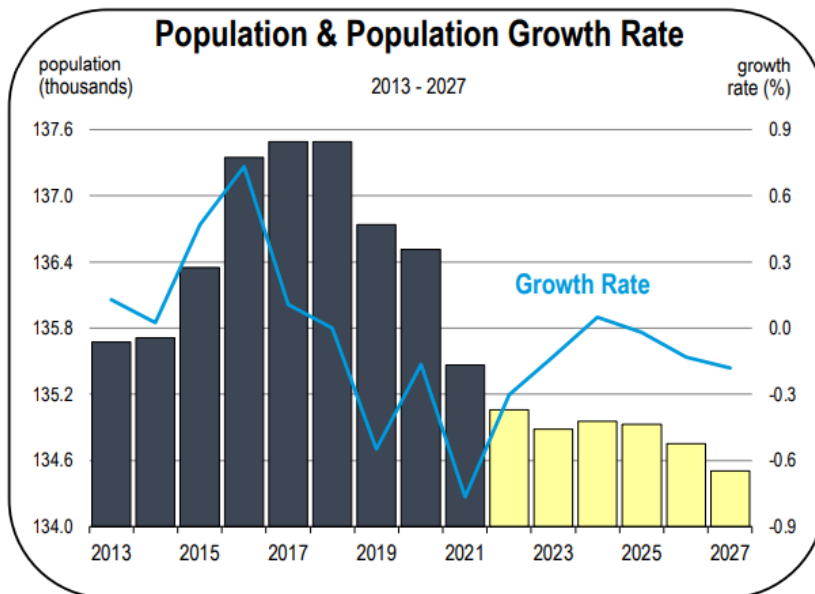


Figure x4: Humboldt's population has declined since 2017, and the population and growth rate are predicted to shrink through 2027. (7)

Humboldt's population has been on a decline for many years. (7) While the net out-migration is expected to subside, the population is aging so rapidly that deaths will outpace births, and the population will continue to shrink. (7) Population decline is of great concern to the county as it creates funding issues at local schools, limits the workforce, stresses the healthcare system, and can initiate a downward spiral of lower and lower growth.

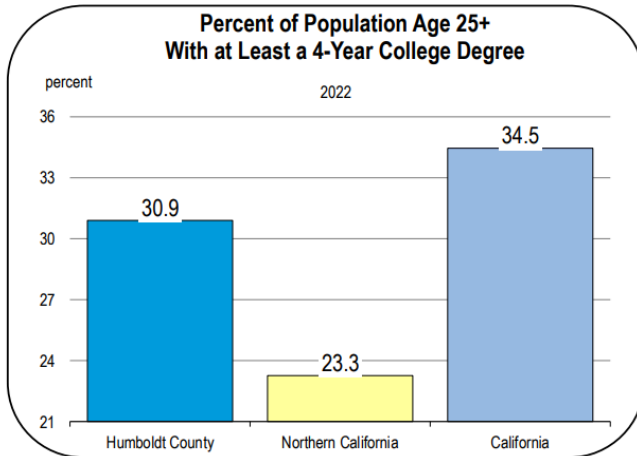
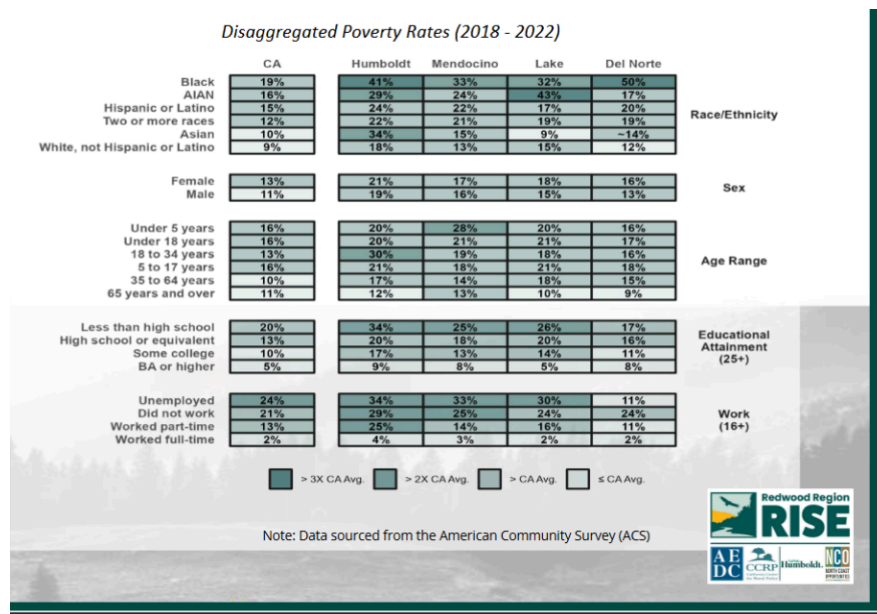


Figure X2: Humboldt County has a higher population percentage with a college degree than Northern California but below C.A. as a whole: (7)

Humboldt's median per capita and household incomes remain low, \$54,043 and \$57,660, respectively in 2022. (15) MIT Living Wage Calculator reports Humboldt County's 2024 living wage for a family of 4 with two working adults as \$58,500 per year per adult, or \$28.15 an hour. (17) California's per capita personal and household incomes were \$77,013 and \$85,300 respectively in 2022. (15) Humboldt has below-state average 4-year educational attainment. (3) Like many rural regions, it struggles to grow and retain its own professional class workforce. Even with Cal Poly Humboldt, interviewees noted a brain drain in the region, especially in the rural areas.



(figure X Shows the regions' disaggregated poverty rates are almost all higher than CA, some significantly so)

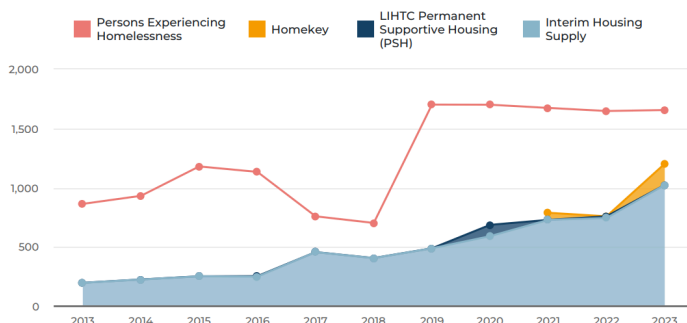
All Reservations or Rancherias in Humboldt County are designated by the California Department of Community Services and Development as "pockets of poverty." (16) The Northern California Indian Development Council reports that in their service area, 27.7% of those living on reservation or trust land live below the poverty line, with young people and children the most likely to fall below the poetry line. (16) In the counties surrounding these areas, less than 20% of

people fall below the poverty line, and in CA, less than 12% do as of 2019. (16) Unemployment on reservation or trust land was almost double that of the county before the pandemic, and Native Americans in Humboldt consistently have the lowest graduation rate of any race. (16)

Economic Insecurity

HOUSING FOR PERSONS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

In 2023 in Humboldt County, there were only **1,203 beds** available in the interim and permanent housing supply for persons experiencing homelessness.

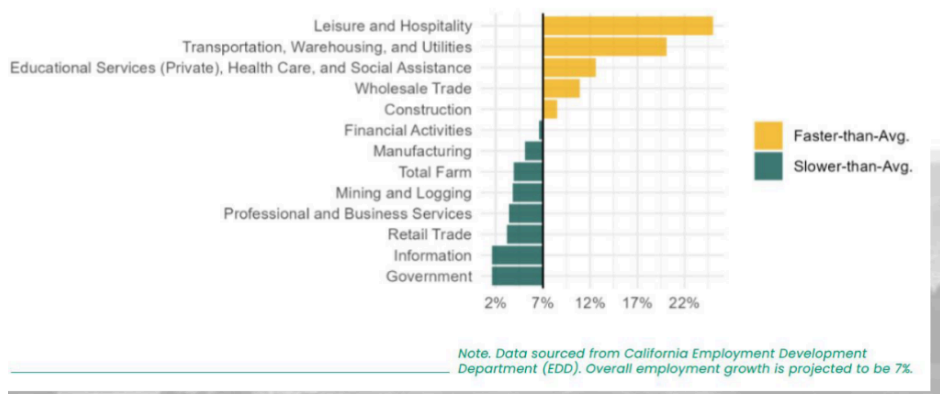


Humboldt Housing Report.

Homelessness is a pervasive problem in Humboldt and hinders economic development actions. (3) Humboldt has the state's third highest food insecurity rate, at 18.2%, whereas the state average is 12.5%. (9) Food insecurity is worse in Humboldt's rural areas, and a CCRP report on the Humboldt food system found a need for increased food stores and healthy food options in extremely rural areas. (10) There is a need for more research into food access and costs to our rural communities. (10)

Labor Market

Figure 6.1 Potential Rate of Job Growth for Major Economic Sectors (2020–2030)



(Figure X growth potentials RRR)

Humboldt's unemployment peaked in April at 15.4% during COVID-19 and fell to 4.1% in May 2024. (14) It has remained at or below 5% since January 2022, as of September 2024. (14) Humboldt is expected to regain jobs lost during COVID-19 by 2024 and grow 3100 jobs from

2022 to 2027. (7) Much of the job growth is expected in the government, outdoor recreation/hospitality, healthcare manufacturing, and retail sectors. (7)

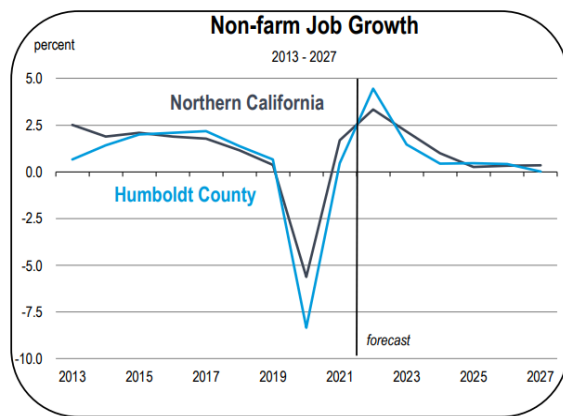


Figure X3: Humboldt job growth rate closely parallels Northern California: CA DOT

Workforce development is a widely recognized need, with gaps in almost all fields and skill levels. Wages in Humboldt tend to be lower than the state average for the same job, and this gap widens in higher-paying positions. (11) This makes attracting and retaining a skilled workforce challenging. Government, healthcare, and social assistance collectively represent $\frac{1}{3}$ of Humboldt's workforce. (11)

Workforce development

Workforce development surfaced as a top priority in interviews and from the CEDS. The region's development has been limited by struggles to attract and retain a workforce matching the needs. (3) The CEDS calls for a workforce development system that brings in more stakeholders to reduce silos and ensure the workforce is being created to meet pressing needs. (3) Interviews also show that clientele want to use more forward-looking economic analysis when setting workforce priorities. This analysis may be an opportunity to partner with CPH and provide value and leadership to the clientele.

The county has its own workforce development board, whereas most counties are part of region-wide workforce development boards. The board offers some education to its board members. The Humboldt County Workforce Development Board identified the following industries as "target industry clusters" due to their favorable characteristics for economic development: Diversified Health Care, Specialty Food, Flowers & Beverages, Building & Systems Construction, Management & Innovation Services, Niche Manufacturing and Investment Support Services. (3) These industries account for more than 60% of private sector wages. (3)

Southern Humboldt faces unique workforce development challenges. It is incredibly rural and hit hard by the demise of timber and cannabis. Workforce development services are badly needed but are challenging to provide effectively, especially when Southern Humboldt doesn't manage or direct these programs. SBDC is expanding into small business support classes in these rural areas, but significant gaps remain. Small business development and credit competency classes will be partially helpful in supporting tribal businesses as they have and can

continue to lack needed support. Because of Southern Humboldt's low population size, data aggregation, especially at the county level, often does not represent reality. Improved data collection for this area is needed to monitor and direct economic development.

Medical workforce development is a need in Humboldt, exacerbated by the aging population. In 2019, the sector had wages 39% above the regional average but the pay still struggles to compete with jobs in other parts of the state. (2)

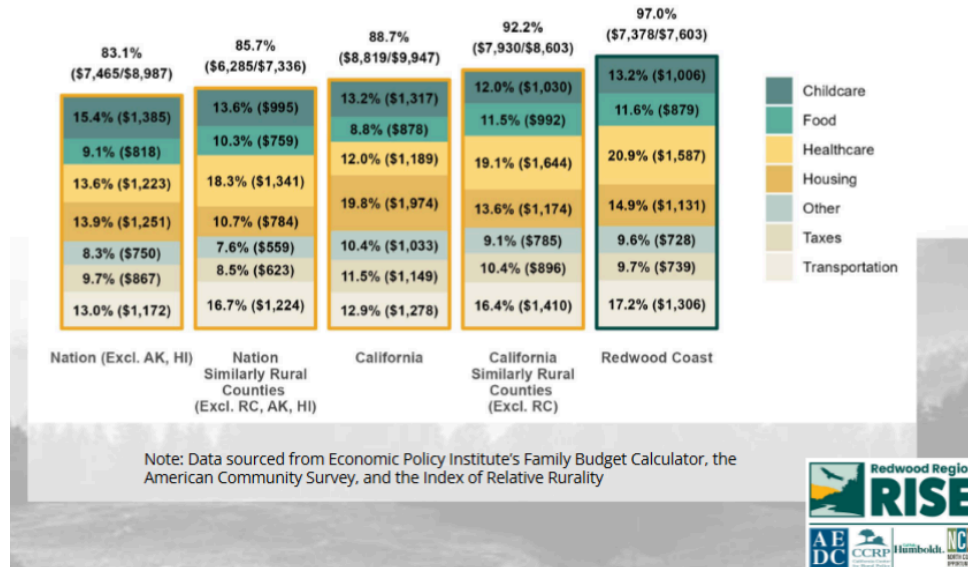
Jobs from OFWs and related development are a potential source of living wage jobs and are getting increasing attention from local governments and institutions. For the residents to fully benefit from this development, developer funding must be provided for workforce development, education, and infrastructure. Ensuring that residents, especially those currently underserved, benefit from this development is paramount to interviewees and to ensure equitable development. To support this, tools like community benefit agreements and project labor agreements are crucial and will need to be supported by economic impact monitoring data. Capacity building is also required to ensure that disinvested communities can study OFWs and their impacts.

Economic Development Support Capacity

There is a lack of capacity in the economic and community development sectors, both in government and the private/ nonprofit sectors. (11) Electected leaders often play many roles and sometimes lack formal training in economic development. (11) Redwood Region Rise(RRR) found that leaders strongly need formal, organized technical support or training and grant writing/ identifying services. (11) This is a natural gap for the advisor to address with their training program. The Greater Eureka Chamber of Commerce and CERC offer expert presentations and Q&As on economic development topics.

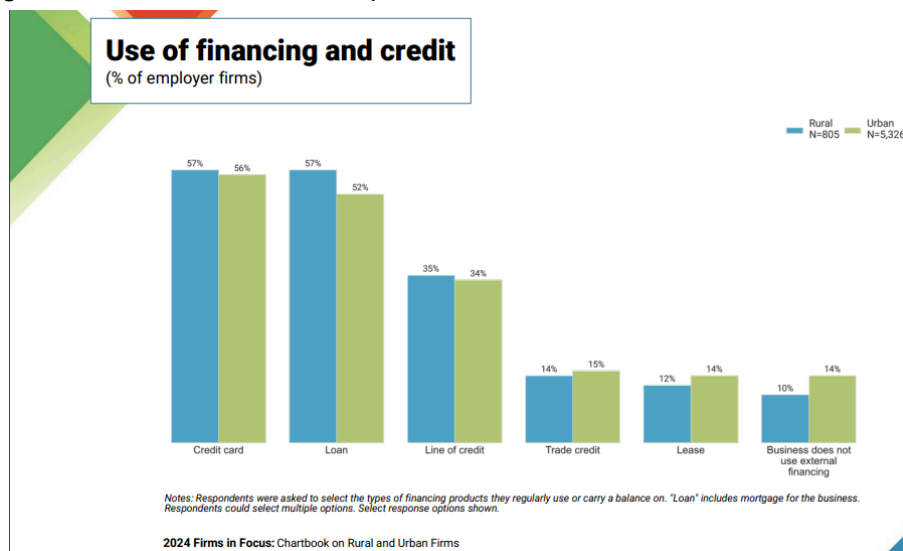
Financial capital

Monthly Cost of Living for a Family of Two Full-Time Working Adults and Two Children (2017 - 2021), Expressed as a Ratio of Labor Income



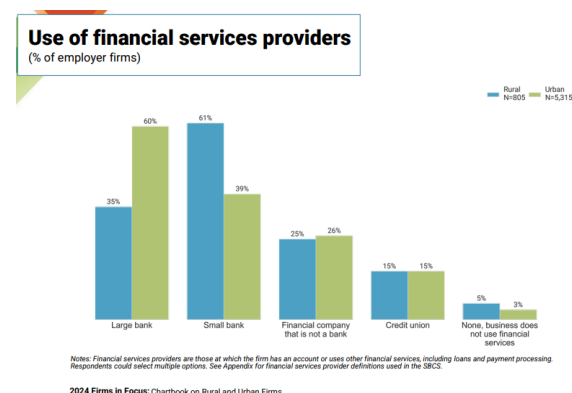
(Figure x)

The cost of living relative to median income ratio squeezes Humboldt residents. This dilemma also hurts businesses, as limited disposable income hurts the local market for consumer goods. These factors contribute to tourism's importance to retail. Increased exports and growth in traded sectors have been goals of the county for many years. (3) Transportation challenges and isolation limit the export market.

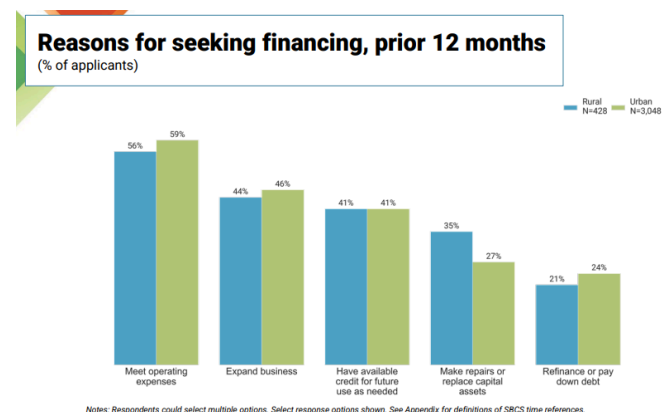


The 2024 Fed Small Business report shows that small businesses, urban or rural, access traditional financing at very similar rates.

Some interviewees cite a lack of financial capital as a development stumbling block, especially for businesses. They note the importance of improving local capital and access to capital from outside the area. Others see capital available for profitable businesses and report the biggest roadblock is finding businesses that fit the criteria. Existing data on this rural capital access is mixed. Studies show that venture capital (VC) is more likely to invest locally, within a few hundred miles of the investor, and VC is generally highly concentrated. (18) In some rural places, Community Development Venture Capital firms have formed with a double bottom line, invest in businesses with growth potential, and invest in businesses with protection to offer living wage jobs to the community. Humboldt is within 300 miles of the Bay Area, one of the world's Venture Capital Meccas. Finding ways to use this asset could assist in capital access.



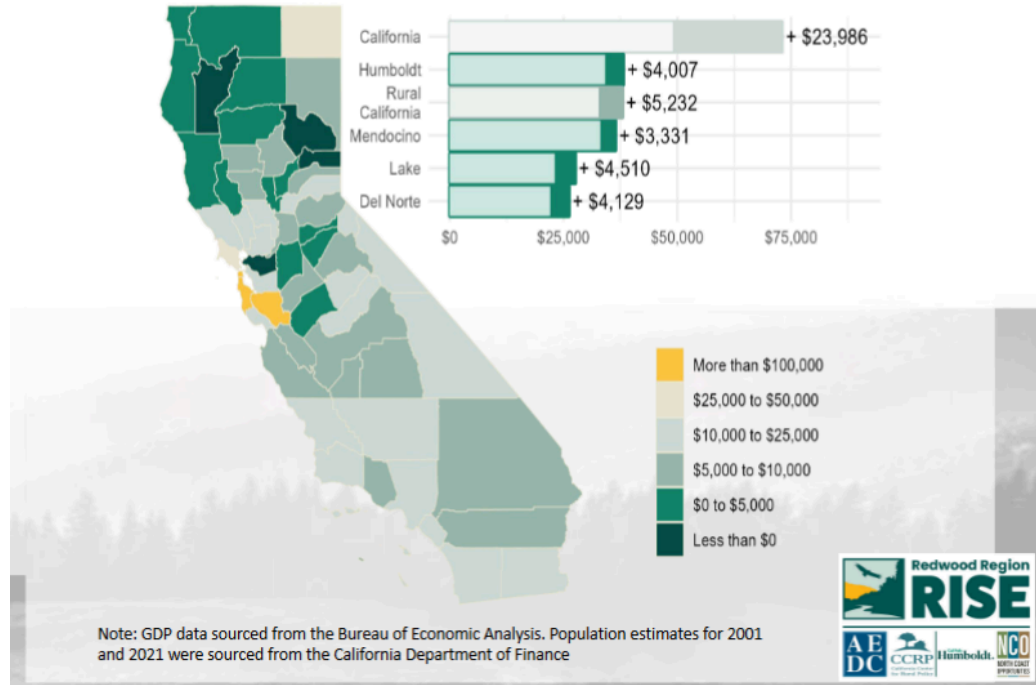
This Fed Small Business Graph shows rural communities' increased use of small banks, which may stem from their location in the community.



2024 Fed Small Business report showing the self-reported reasons small businesses looked for financing

Humboldt is served by the Arcata Economic Development Corporation, AEDC, and the Redwood Region Economic Development Commission, RREDEC, which provide funding for local small businesses. The Humboldt Area Foundation is the go-to philanthropic funder. The [Humboldt Childcare Stabilization Fund](#), run by AEDC, is an asset and an example of local CED. The Headwaters Fund is also a significant funding source. [The Dishgamu Humboldt Community Land Trust](#) is an innovative land trust with multiple proposals for landback strategies. The Hoopa Development Fund is tooling up to restart issuing loans to serve tribal citizens.

Change in Economic Output (Real Gross Domestic Product [GDP] per Capita, 2001 - 2021)



(Figure x Humboldt and Del Norte Counties show lower GDP growth than California or Rural California)

Built Capital

The county boasts the California Redwood Coast-Humboldt County Airport, multiple hospitals, and the Humboldt Bay Harbor. (3) Humboldt's urban centers are largely built out but dilapidated, with urban interviewees noting this as a hindrance to development.

Infrastructure

The county CEDS notes infrastructure improvements as a strategy for workforce retention and business development. (3) Poor road and water control infrastructure were noted as development barriers. (3) There are also gaps in supply chain infrastructure, such as cold storage nodes and critical processing facilities. Key infrastructure areas include broadband, electricity, food security, and transportation. (3)

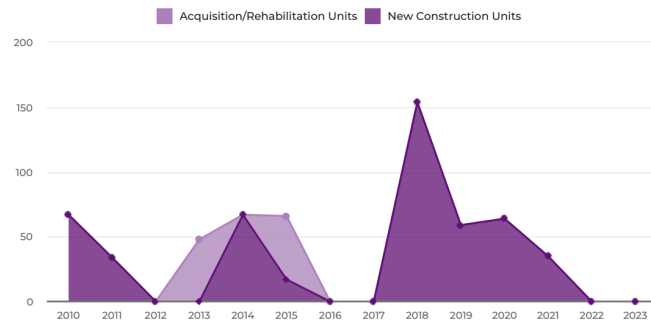
Humboldt County is a hotbed of energy development. The Blue Lake Rancheria's microgrid and accompanying programs, Redwood Coast Energy Authority, Offshore wind, and abundant biomass are regional assets. Rural and Tribal areas of Humboldt need investment with frequent lengthy power and internet outages. Interviewees note the importance of improving energy infrastructure to business attraction and community resilience. Interviewees stress the need to better understand how to secure local benefits from large infrastructure projects, specifically around offshore wind. With large amounts of money coming into the area,

interviewees want to know how to leverage that into long-term improvements in community infrastructure, education, roads, medical care, etc.

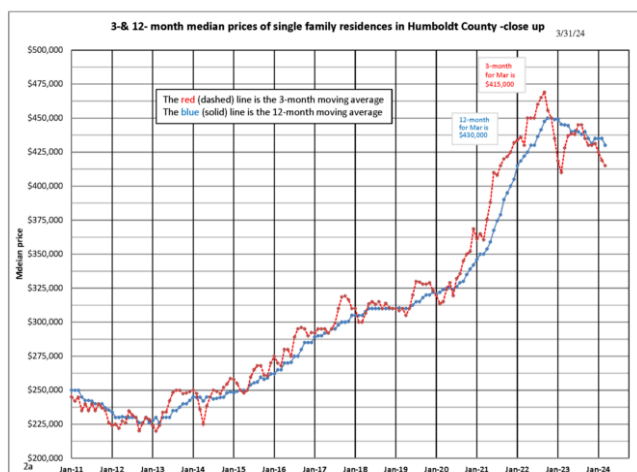
Housing

LIHTC PRODUCTION AND PRESERVATION

There was no Low-Income Housing Tax Credit production and preservation in Humboldt County in 2022 or 2023.



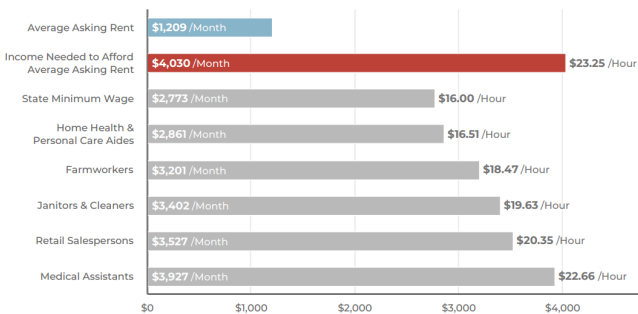
[Humboldt County Housing Report](#)



The median home price has been steadily climbing since the start of 2011—Humboldt [Association of Realtors](#). Improving housing availability, both market rate and low income, is a priority for my clientele. Clientele sees a lack of needed housing impacts workforce availability, community health and maintaining the population. As of the 2024 Housing Needs Report, there was a need for just over 8000 affordable and available rental units; the report found only around 2000, leaving a shortfall of over 6000 units. (19) 31% of moderate-income households are housing cost-burdened, and over 75% of low-income residents are cost-burdened. (19) Lack of housing affects pricing across the board, but the most vulnerable are feeling the brunt of it.

WHO CAN AFFORD TO RENT

Renters need to earn **1.5 times** the minimum wage to afford the average asking rent in Humboldt County.



The hourly wage to afford the average asking rent is \$23.25, just below the median household income wage rate of \$27.72 an hour. (15)

Graphic from the

[Humboldt County Housing Report](#)

Social Capital

Bridging social capital, the “long” bonds that hold different organizations or groups together, can be easier to build with Humboldt’s small population. Meeting groups like CERC bring economic and community development practitioners together weekly, and connections can be made quickly. The bridging relationships between Southern Humboldt and Humboldt Bay can often be strained, with Southern Humboldt not getting the support, control, or attention required. Interviewees proposed community engagement with more direction and control to increase community support.

Interviewees cite collaboration inside Humboldt and as a Redwood Coast region as an essential CED strategy, which is seen as a way to pool limited resources and learn from each other. Redwood Region Rise is helping build county and regional collaborations, and many participants see its usefulness as a way to build collaboration infrastructure for future economic development.

Political capital

Humboldt County has the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors, Arcata, Eureka, and other City Councils as local elected bodies. There are also many Federally Recognized Tribal governments in Humboldt. Humboldt County is part of a CA State Assembly district stretching along the coast from Oregon to Santa Rosa, and its US Congressional and CA Senate districts stretch from Oregon to the Golden Gate Bridge. Despite the large districts, Humboldt clientele has regular contact with state and federal representatives, and reps often send their staff to local meetings like CERC.

Research and Data

The Economic Development Department and Cal Poly Humboldt are assets to Humboldt and provide some economic analysis. Most current analysis is largely historical (using reports from the past month, quarter, or year). My clientele need forward-looking projections in industry sector analysis, labor market growth, and localized forecasts for the different regions in Humboldt. These kinds of projections are required to inform strategies such as the Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy or general plans.

There are subject matter and geographic gaps in economic data collection and analysis in Humboldt. Rural Humboldt has specific research and data collection needs. Because of its sparse and isolated population, county averages often do not represent the reality of Southern or Eastern Humboldt. These regions need attention and data collection methods that effectively serve the incredibly rural region. Economic impact monitoring of projects is a continual need and supports more effective programming and helps bring in funds. This monitoring work can be very time-consuming, and while some direct support may be appropriate, the advisor cannot fill this gap directly. Data analysis capacity will be built over time within the CEDLAB. While data support is needed, capacity building inside UC ANR is required first.

Extension education and training

While there are resources providing training, there are many unmet training and education needs among CED practitioners in Humboldt. Many of those working in the CED space have limited, if any, formal economic development training. They are “accidental economic developers” serving in other roles, such as city planners, nonprofit leaders, and elected officials. Because of this group's accidental entanglement with economic development, long curriculum-based CED 101 classes similar to CALED's classes are less appealing to this group, which might only be interested in or have time to learn about a select few CED topics.

Because of the nature of the audience, the advisor will create a series of self-contained sub-3-hour training sessions on individual CED topics. Clientele also emphasizes the desire to “get things done” or go from paper recommendation to actual program or project. They also stress the importance of examples from relevant communities. The training will include a deep dive into a pertinent implementation example in a similar community to address this. This will consist of a guest who participated in the project whenever possible. The training will also include local resources to ensure attendees leave with a clear path forward. The topics for these trainings should come from the above document, considering where strong partnerships can be found for presenting and co-teaching the training.

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Appendix

Boilerplate Questionnaire

1. How does your organization address economic development?
2. What economic development programs do your organization run that you think are most impactful, innovative, or in a space no one else is serving?
3. What are the biggest growth opportunities you see for Humboldt, and what are the key intervention points to get the most out of these opportunities?
4. What groups are forming, formed, or functioning for economic development planning and coordination? Are there industry groups meeting for sector planning?
5. Does your organization offer training related to the workforce, small businesses, or the economy? Where are the gaps and strengths in these programs?
6. What kind of funding mechanisms do you use most often, and are there any you would like to break into? (Grants, special districts, local taxes, state funding vehicles, private investment, CDFIs, public-private loan mechanisms, tax rebates, etc)
7. Do you use research and data for your planning? How? What data would help your organization and partners that you do not currently have?
8. What are the biggest sticking points for development in Humboldt? Places, sectors, policies, where “if that changed it would be a game changer for how we deal with _____.”
9. What other people and groups should I be talking to to learn about the critical needs in our communities and economy?