



Economic Development & Workforce Council Newsletter

2026 | January

TOP STORY

Empowering our Community Thrive in 2026



“What makes our community thrive,” asked EDWC Chair Christina Kraft to a room full of local business leaders. “Is it the mountains that surround us, the visitors who come from around the world, or the businesses that keep our economy alive? The truth is—it’s all of us, working together,” she said to a room full of nods and approving cheers.

At the recent State of Estes, Kraft, the Chair of the Economic Development & Workforce Council (EDWC) reflected on the successes of 2025 and laid out her plans for elevating local business in 2026.

“Over the past year, the EDWC delivered more than 30 educational programs, reaching 223 participants and creating an estimated \$600,000 in educational value for our

community. That’s not just a number—it represents real people gaining new skills, businesses finding new opportunities, and a stronger foundation for our local economy,” she noted.

“But numbers alone don’t tell the full story. Behind every program is a team of dedicated individuals who believe in the power of collaboration and invest countless hours, energy, and passion into strengthening our business community,” she added. Kraft went on to talk about why this work matters, saying, “the EDWC is committed to fostering a vibrant, diverse, and sustainable economy for the Estes Valley. We are a true public-private partnership—a collaboration of community stakeholders united by a shared vision: to support businesses so they can thrive today and tomorrow. Our economic climate is unique. Geographic isolation, a seasonal economy, high housing costs, and workforce challenges require creative solutions. That’s why the council focuses on four key areas: Business Retention and Expansion, Workforce Development, Economic Diversification, and Partnership and Collaboration.”

As she detailed each of the four areas, Kraft noted, “Economic Diversification will be a priority for us in 2026,” Kraft said. “While Estes Park is a top destination for visitors worldwide, we also want to be a top destination for talent. Through upskilling programs, workshops, the BASE Program, employer partnerships, and career pathways for youth and adults, we address both current and future workforce needs. Since the inception of the BASE Program, we’ve proudly graduated 57 individuals—each one gaining tools and confidence to succeed in their entrepreneurial journey. Imagine a high school student discovering a career path right here in Estes Park—or a seasoned professional finding new opportunities without leaving the valley. That’s the kind of impact we strive for,” she added.

Business Retention and Expansion is another cornerstone of the Council’s work. The 2026 plan includes expanding programs to provide training—both broad and tailored—while creating supportive networking opportunities where business owners can share ideas, solve challenges, and thrive through shared experiences and partnership.

Kraft went deeper into discussing partnerships stating that “partnerships are the force multipliers of economic development.” The EDWC currently works with 13 community and statewide partners including the Small Business Development Center which brings coaching and classes directly to local operators and the Economic Development Council of Colorado which connects local folks with communities facing similar challenges and opportunities to learn from shared experiences.

Kraft concluded her presentation with a question: What makes a community thrive? “The answer,” she said, “is simple—it’s all of us, working together.”

The Economic Development & Workforce Council is comprised of local business leaders including:

Christina Kraft, Bank of Colorado, EDWC Chair

Rebecca D. Gelsinger, Visit Estes Park, EDWC Vice Chair

Adam Crowe, Larimer County Economic and Workforce Development

Bill Brown, Town of Estes Park

Jason Damweber, Town of Estes Park

Nick Smith, Lumpy Ridge Brewing Company

Kevin Benes, Running Wild Events

Val Thompson, Your Swag Squad

Peter Levine, Estes Park Housing Authority

COFFEE & BOOKS
February 27, 8:30AM-10:00AM

Hosted at The Spice Rack
Facilitated by Shannon Jones, General Manager
of YMCA of the Rockies

[Learn More & Get the Book](#)

Q1 'Un-Book Club' Reading: *Red Shoes Living*

This winter, we are diving into the core ideas of the book and how they translate into leadership, culture, and accountability in real-life organizations. Do not worry if you have not read the book by our Feb 27th gathering. A summary will be provided, and the conversation focuses more on the themes and takeaways than the pages themselves. That is what makes it an 'Un' Book Club.

Come ready to connect, reflect, and engage in thoughtful discussion guided by a leader who brings the principles of Red Shoes Living to life every day.



Bridging the Seasons: Financial Tools to Help Local Businesses Stay Resilient

Local businesses across the Estes Valley experience natural highs and lows throughout the year. Seasonal shifts can impact cash flow, staffing, and long-term planning, making access to the right financial tools especially important. To support our business community, we have compiled a list of trusted local, regional, and state resources designed to help businesses stay resilient, plan ahead, and navigate changing economic conditions with confidence.

[Access the Tools](#)

Colorado State Updates



Amplify AI - AI with Integrity. Innovation with Impact.

Tuesday, January 20, 2025
Embassy Suites, Loveland
A Northern Colorado AI Summit for Businesses, Nonprofits and Community Leaders

Join us to explore the power and potential of artificial intelligence — from big ideas to real-world applications that drive results.

Morning Opportunities:
7:30 AM – 12:00 PM
Tickets: \$55 (includes hot breakfast)
Keynote: From Hidden to Highlighted:
Winning in GenAI Search
Pete Blackshaw, Founder and CEO of BrandRank.AI

The rules of search are changing fast. With firms like Gartner predicting a 50% drop in organic search traffic by 2028 due to Generative AI, small businesses must adapt quickly.

Pete Blackshaw will show you how to take your business from hidden to highlighted in AI-powered "Answer Engines" like ChatGPT and Google Gemini.

You'll learn:



The Young Entrepreneur Tournament is accepting applications for Spring 2026!

It all starts with an idea. Discover what it takes to make your ideas a business reality in a series of fun, hands-on Saturday sessions. Work with experienced business leaders and build a business model you can put into action. Compete with your peers to win money to start your enterprise.

YET offers individuals 12-18 an incredible opportunity. No idea is too small, no experience necessary to begin this exciting journey!

[Learn More & Apply](#)



- How AI algorithms evaluate and prioritize content
- What it takes to be “content ready” in the new search landscape
- Actionable ways your business can improve visibility in GenAI search results
- Practical next steps your entire team can put into motion

Expert Speakers & Local Thought Leader Panel

Hear from regional AI innovators, business leaders, and educators as they explore how AI is reshaping work, marketing, customer expectations, and entrepreneurship.

Speaker announcements coming soon!

[Register Today](#)

Leading Edge Strategic Planning 6 Week Series

Start Date: January 27, 2026

When: Tuesdays, 10:00 AM – 12:00 PM

Cost: *\$395.00

LEADING EDGE™ is a 6-week program (with weekly sessions) that equips entrepreneurs with the skills, confidence, and perspective to grow their business and lead with impact.

LEADING EDGE™ is designed to turn potential into progress. Through a mix of interactive online learning and engaging live sessions led by experts, you'll explore core business concepts, connect them to your own venture, and participate in discussions that spark actionable insights. Each topic is introduced ahead of time so you can arrive prepared and ready to dive in. By the end of the program, you'll gain greater clarity, a stronger understanding of how to grow your business, and the confidence to make informed decisions that drive results.

[Learn More](#)



Colorado OEDIT: 16 Key Contributions of 2025

We all know Colorado has four corners and four sides. We're also known for the 4x4s we drive to visit our gorgeous plains, canyons, mountains, and valleys. But have you ever noticed how Colorado is spelled with four consonants and four vowels? We also build housing Coloradans can afford with 4x4s (except, of course, for when we are pioneering new technologies like 3D printing). As we close out 2025, we're taking our cue from the number four by unwrapping 16 contributions OEDIT made to a Colorado economy that works for everyone. Why 16? Because 4x4 (or four squared) is 16.

[Learn More](#)

The Office of Economic Development and International Trade (OEDIT) is accepting Advanced Industries Accelerator Program applications for the second grant cycle of fiscal

year 2026. Online applications are being accepted for the Proof of Concept Grant and Early Stage Capital and Retention Grant. Applications are due by 5:00 pm on February 26, 2026. The Advanced Industries Accelerator Programs were created in 2013 to promote growth and sustainability in Colorado's advanced industries by helping drive innovation, accelerating commercialization, encouraging public-private partnerships, increasing access to early stage capital and creating Colorado's advanced industries are:

- Advanced manufacturing
- Aerospace
- Bioscience
- Electronics
- Energy and natural resources
- Infrastructure engineering
- Technology and information

Proof of Concept grants are open to approved Colorado research universities and federal labs located in Colorado. These grants are for pre-commercialization research and commercialization preparation of innovative technologies. Grants up to \$150,000 will be awarded.

Early-Stage Capital and Retention grants fund companies commercializing innovative technologies to create viable products that meet a market need and can be created or manufactured in Colorado and exported globally. Grants up to \$250,000 will be awarded.

[Learn More](#)



Are you curious about purchasing local food for your business?

You and your business are invited to the Farm2LocalBiz Networking Event, hosted by the Larimer County Extension Office at **Block One Events** in Fort Collins on February 5, 2026 from 4:30 - 7:30pm.

Event Agenda:

- 4:30pm: Doors open
- 5:00pm: Purchasing Local Panel
- 6:00pm: Networking & Sampling Delicious Local Fare

You'll have the opportunity to connect with over 30 Northern Colorado agricultural producers, sampling an array of premium local meats, dairy products, grains, honey, and produce. As you explore, savor locally crafted wine, beer, and appetizers—each dish featuring ingredients from the very producers showcased at the event.

Attendees will receive a \$100 coupon for their first purchase from any of the farms or ranches at the event.



Level-up your Recruitment Game

Get ready to level up your recruitment game with a one-on-one, online coaching session - maximize your profile to attract a bigger talent pool! We are excited to invite you to a free one-on-one, 15-minute coaching session that can significantly enhance your recruiting efforts for part-time and full-time positions, and connect you with top-notch talent! Northern Colorado's higher education institutions are coming together to help you with the ins and outs of Handshake, the premier online job board that simplifies the hiring process and connects employers with a diverse pool of exceptional talent from our region.

Coaching sessions will be in 15 minute increments during the below times:

- Friday, January 9th, 9am-10:30am
- Friday, January 16th, 9am-10:30am

[Register Today](#)

- Friday, January 23rd, 9am-10:30am
- Friday, January 30th, 9am-10:30am

[Learn More](#)

Larimer County Updates



TAXES - Get Informed and Organized Now!

Wednesday, Jan 21, 2026
8:30 AM - 12:00 PM

Get your taxes and record-keeping organized in order to Minimize Your Tax Burden. Topics will include:

- Self-employment tax
- Estimated tax payments
- Tax differences of various business entity types
- Tax deductions such as travel, meals and home office
- Depreciation
- 1099's vs. W-2's
- Sales and use tax

This will be your only chance to take this course before the upcoming tax deadlines! Don't delay!

Loveland business owners are eligible for a partial scholarship, made possible through the generosity of the City of Loveland.

[Reach Out for a Scholarship Code](#)



COLLEGE OF BUSINESS
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

Food Safety and Business Training for Colorado Cottage Foods Producers

Two trainings are being offered to support cottage food business.

Food safety - Learn how to safely produce food from home as a cottage food business. This course covers a variety of topics, including: basic food safety, foods that are permissible under the updated Colorado Cottage Foods Act, ingredient labeling, special considerations for food preparation at high altitudes, and safe food sampling best practices. Registration is \$55.

Business Training - You've perfected your product, now it's time to cash in!! Whether you're targeting local farmer's markets, family and friends, or retail store shelves, this short-course will give you tools to consider your costs of production and your product-market fit. The training provides easy-to-use tools as you launch and grow.

[Food Safety: Learn More & Register](#)

[Business Training: Learn More & Register](#)



Inclusive by Design: Event Planning for Today's Business

Information provided by: NOCOBiz Connect

**Friday, January 30
12:00 pm - 1:30 pm
Virtual**

Spanish interpretation available

Join NOCOBiz Connect and Chrysta Bairre from She goes High for a webinar that will explore how in today's diverse marketplace, inclusive events aren't just thoughtful—they're strategic.

Whether you're hosting customer appreciation days, staff retreats, or public engagement events, the way you plan can make or break your impact. Inclusive by Design: Event Planning for Today's Businesses is a practical workshop designed to help businesses plan more welcoming, accessible, and impactful events. Let's redefine what a successful business event looks like—together.

[Learn More](#)



Nonprofit Leadership Academy

The **Aims Nonprofit Leadership Academy** (NLA) supports the nonprofit sector with applied professional development leadership courses that can lead to a certificate in nonprofit leadership. Classes are offered in a variety of modalities to fit your busy schedule. To



Spring Venture Validator Registration

**Thursdays: February 12, 19, 26 and
March 5, 12
5:00 pm - 6:45 pm
Virtual**

Have a business idea and want to explore whether it could become a viable venture? Venture Validator returns this spring as a free, hands-on program designed to help aspiring entrepreneurs validate their ideas through customer discovery, market research, business modeling, and prototyping with guidance from experienced coaches.

[Learn More](#)



Climate Employers Survey
Information provided by: Colorado Workforce Development Council (CWDC)

The CWDC is working with Inclusive Design Group (IDG) to help better understand how employers view and

earn a Nonprofit Leadership Academy Certificate, students must complete five courses of their choosing.

Future-Proof Your Tech: Strategic Selection for Nonprofit Success

Free webinar! Thursday, January 22 from 10-11 a.m. on Zoom

Nonprofit Shared Governance and Executive Leadership

Wednesdays, January 28 – March 11 from 6-8 p.m. on Zoom

Grant Readiness and Grant Writing Intensive

February 2 – March 13, online

Strategic Planning for Nonprofit Leaders

February 5 – March 5 from 6-7:30 p.m. on Zoom

Scholarships Available! Reach out for details

[Learn More](#)

create quality jobs to attract and retain workers in the climate/energy sector. With the growing workforce demand, we are seeking to connect with diverse employers across Colorado with IDG to share their unique experiences and perspectives.

We are seeking to engage with climate employers through January 23, 2026. Use IDG's scheduling link to connect for a 30-60 minute interview, or take this brief survey as an alternative way to capture valued input.

IDG is interested in learning about:

- How does their organization approach skills-first talent management?
- How does this employer think about job quality within their organization, and what practices or systems are they developing to support high-quality jobs?
- Barriers for their organization in utilizing skills-first hiring and increasing job quality.
- Incentives and resources that would be helpful for their organization in adopting skills-first hiring practices and increasing job quality in specific roles in their organization
- What skills do their employees need to be successful in their roles?

[Schedule Time](#)

EDWC Council Members

Christina Kraft, Bank of Colorado, Market President Estes Park, EDWC Chair

Bill Brown, Estes Park Town Trustee

Jason Damweber, Estes Park, Deputy Town Administrator

Adam Crowe, Larimer County, Economic Development Manager

Rebecca D. Gelsinger, Visit Estes Park, Director of Operations

Nick Smith, Lumpy Ridge Brewing, Owner

Val Thompson, Your Swag Squad

Kevin Benes, Running Wild Events

Peter Levine, Estes Park Housing Authority



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