



**VALENCIA COUNTY
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
RESOLUTION № 2022- 12**

**ACCEPTING THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF VALENCIA COUNTY; AND APPROVING
THE PLAN FOR DISTRIBUTION**

WHEREAS, the Comprehensive Land Use Plan for Valencia County has been updated and completed following an extensive planning process overseen by the Valencia County Community Development staff and prepared by the staff of Bohannon Huston Inc., under a Planning Services Agreement; and

WHEREAS, Goals and Objectives for the Valencia County Comprehensive Plan were adopted on February 2nd, 2022 by the Board of County Commissioners to establish a basis for policy decisions regarding the future development of the County; and

WHEREAS, "Recommendations for Action" for the Valencia County Comprehensive Plan were adopted on February 2nd, 2022, by the Board of County Commissioners to identify the key issues, proposed strategies, and potential policy directives for the County; and


WHEREAS, a public information and citizen input process was carried out to ensure general public acceptance of the Comprehensive Plan for the County; and

WHEREAS, all of the required components of the Comprehensive Plan have been assembled and reviewed for completeness and factual information in a comprehensive document accessible to the citizens of Valencia County; and


WHEREAS, the Valencia County Comprehensive Land Use Plan will provide a basis for establishing policy and implementation strategies for future development in the County, for providing a framework for the integration of special purpose plans and programs for the County, and for promoting a consistency with other plans at local, regional, state, and federal levels.

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Board of County Commissioners does hereby accept the Valencia County Comprehensive Land Use Plan, attached and made a part of this Resolution, and approves such Plan for general public distribution. This resolution supersedes Valencia County Resolution 2005-66.


APPROVED, ADOPTED AND PASSED on this 2nd day of February, 2022




Gerard Saiz
Chair, District I



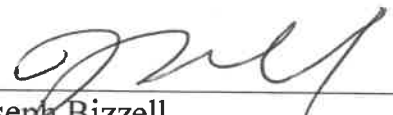
Jhonathan Aragon
Vice-Chair, District V



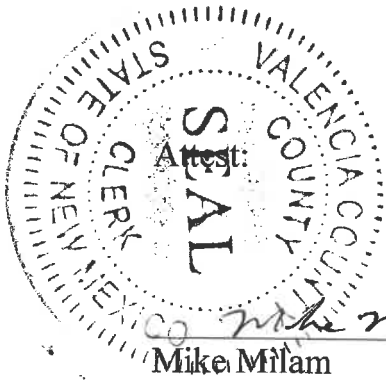
Troy Richardson
Commissioner, District II

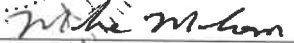


David A. Hyder
Commissioner, District III



Joseph Bizzell
Commissioner, District IV





Mike Milam
Valencia County Clerk

The background of the cover is a photograph of a desert landscape. In the foreground, there is a field of dark, scrubby vegetation with some reddish-brown plants. In the middle ground, there are two dark, rounded hills or mountains. The sky is a clear, bright blue with some light, wispy clouds. The overall scene is captured in a wide-angle shot, emphasizing the vastness of the landscape.

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

2022

Acknowledgements

January 2022

Valencia County Commission

- Gerard Saiz, District 1
- Troy Richardson, District 2
- David Hyder, District 3
- Joseph Bizzell, District 4
- Jhonathan Aragon, District 5

Key Valencia County Staff

- Nancy Jo Gonzales, MPA – Community Development Director
- Gabriel Luna – Land Use Planner

Bohannon Huston, Inc.

- Denise Aten, AICP
- Clare Haley
- Curtis Sanders
- Aaron Sussman, AICP
- Sophia Thompson

Much of the development of this document took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. We appreciate the flexibility, understanding, and participation of everyone who provided input to the plan development process during an unusual time. Thank you to numerous staff members of Valencia County staff who provided input, comments, and data for this Comprehensive Plan Update.



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INTRODUCTION

Plan Overview

A Comprehensive Plan is a policy guide that documents existing conditions across Valencia County, as well as long-term needs and priorities, and can be used to inform investment choices and decisions around land use and development proposals. This Plan focuses primarily on unincorporated portions of Valencia County and the services provided by the County government. However, the document considers trends and economic activity in places such as Los Lunas and Albuquerque that affect Valencia County residents.

A Comprehensive Plan is not in itself an implementation document, and it is important to note the difference between the Comprehensive Plan and regulatory documents. In contrast to zoning code, which governs how land may be used in different districts, or the infrastructure capital improvement program, which contains a list of near-term infrastructure investments, the Comprehensive Plan establishes general policy guidance and sets priorities for investments. The intent is that the policy guidance contained here is referenced during planning and budgeting efforts and as part of land use decisions, including zone change requests and approvals of development master plans.

The Comprehensive Plan is therefore an opportunity to create a vision for the future of Valencia County through a community-driven process. The update to the Comprehensive Plan is timely as the previous document had not been updated since 2005 and was no longer an effective reference for land use and policy decisions.

Plan Development Process

The Valencia County Comprehensive Plan was developed over the course of 2021 with the involvement of staff and stakeholders from across the County as well as MRCOG. Though created during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the plan development process involved robust public outreach including a project website, community survey with high levels of participation, and numerous virtual events.

Key Issues in Valencia County

The Comprehensive Plan responds to a number of critical challenges and issues facing Valencia County. Foremost among these issues is the tension between nearby urban development and the need for additional services with the desire to preserve the rural and agricultural character of much of unincorporated Valencia County. A major goal of the Comprehensive Plan is to allow Valencia County to grow consciously in ways that preserve historic agricultural communities while accommodating the long-term needs of a changing population.

Valencia County is expected to experience modest population and employment growth by 2040 and there are increasing housing costs and demand for additional residences in the greater Albuquerque area. In addition, the dynamics of the population are changing as the share of senior citizens is increasing. Addressing these dynamics will require more flexible housing options and a need to consider acceptable forms of new development.

Why is a Comprehensive Plan important?

The Valencia County Comprehensive Plan is a policy document that informs decisions about capital investments and land use. Key benefits include:

- Consider general infrastructure and investment priorities over the coming decades
- Understand and anticipate changing demographics and economic conditions
- Identify strategies that may be pursued to achieve County goals
- Reference document for staff, residents, and policy-makers during development of the capital improvement program
- Provides support for Valencia County when pursuing a variety of grant funding

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At the same time there are major opportunities that County officials, businesses, and residents can take advantage of. A new river crossing that will improve access to services and employment sites across the County is nearing implementation, and commercial development in Los Lunas and Albuquerque have brought additional jobs and services to the region. The Comprehensive Plan also highlights the opportunities for coordination and collaboration among local agencies in areas ranging from economic development to transportation and the provision of recreational opportunities.

To balance among these competing tensions, the Comprehensive Plan identifies a series of Priority Growth Areas where new growth and development can be accommodated in the County to ensure improved services and additional housing opportunities while reducing the pressure for new development in more rural and agricultural areas. Ultimately, this Plan presents that it is possible to retain the character and identity of Valencia County residents while ensuring the modern services, employment opportunities, and housing options required to maintain a high quality of life among residents.

Outline for the Comprehensive Plan

The Comprehensive Plan contains various chapters that each follow a common general outline: 1) Existing Conditions; 2) Community Priorities; 3) Policies and Action Items. The chapters in the Comprehensive Plan include:

- Community Profile / Demographics
- Community Outreach
- Land Use
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Transportation
- Community Services & Utilities
- Environment & Water Resources

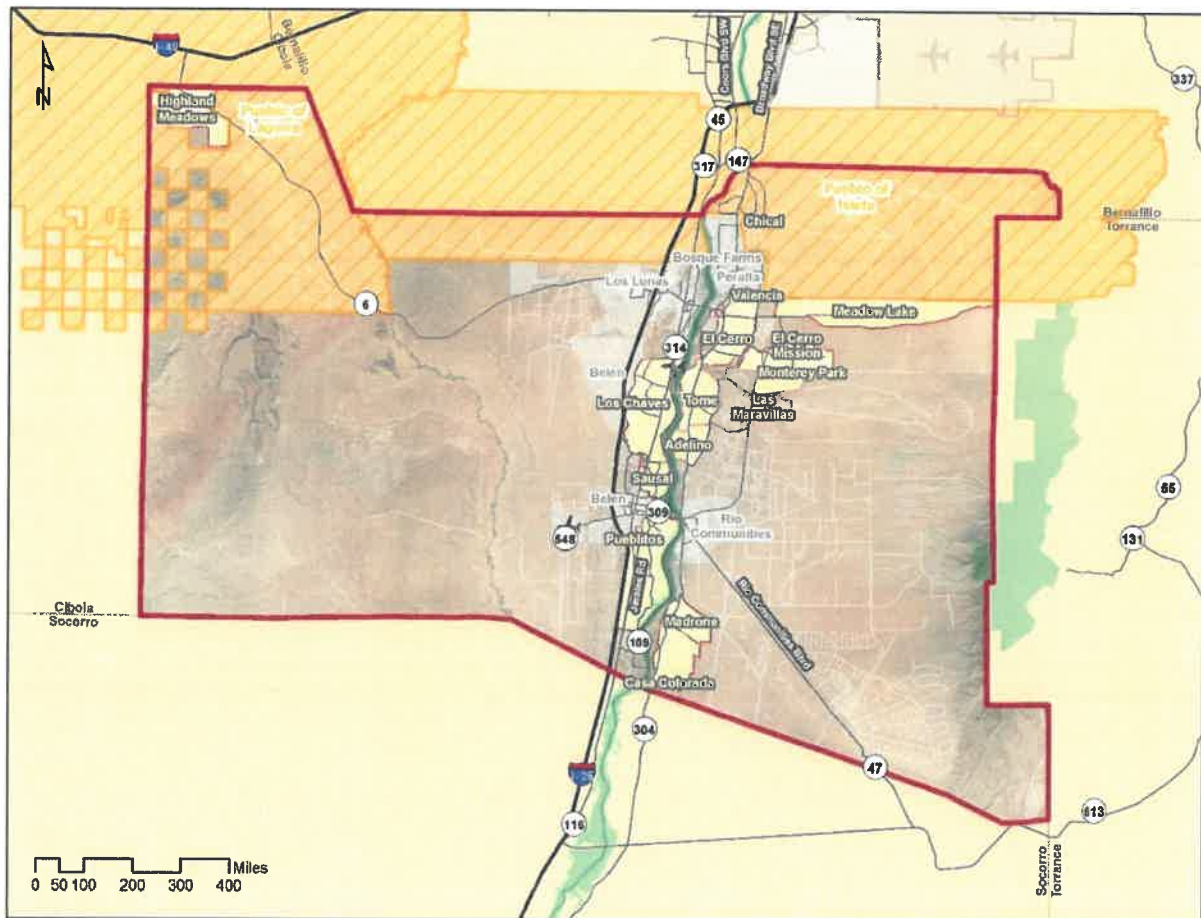
COMMUNITY PROFILE

Valencia County has evolved from a series of historically agricultural settlements to a place that now features a mix of rural elements and newly-development communities on the cutting edge of tech development. Yet Valencia County maintains a rich natural and cultural heritage that – along with its beautiful landscapes and the proximity to Albuquerque – makes it a highly desirable place to live. The following section details the context and history of Valencia County and provides a profile of the current residents of the County based upon recent Census data and other population estimates.

GEOGRAPHY AND CONTEXT

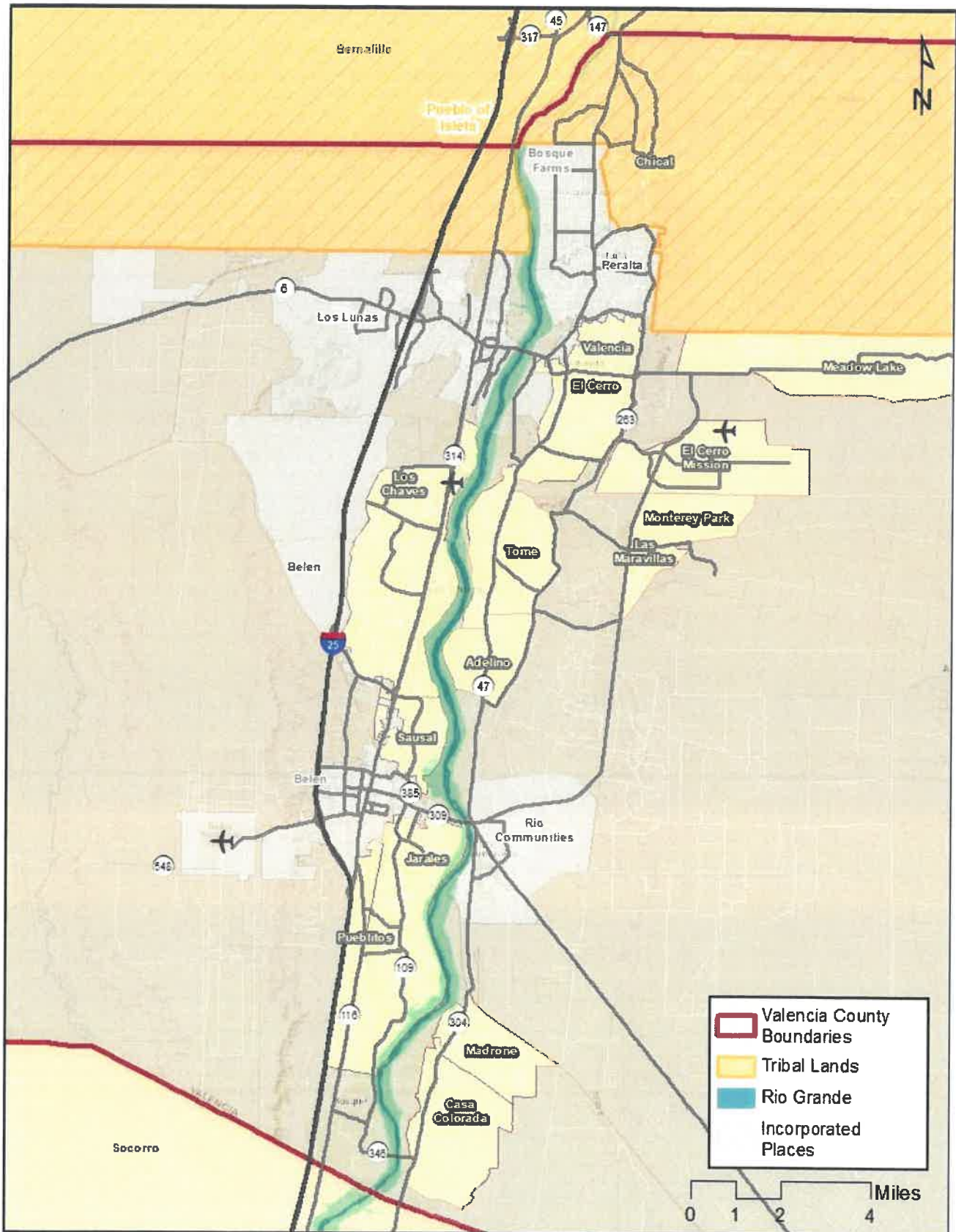
Valencia County covers a land area of 1,068 square miles in central New Mexico, making it the second smallest county by area in New Mexico. Valencia County is bordered by Bernalillo County to the north, Torrance County to the east, Cibola County to the west, and Socorro County to the south. Due to the County's proximity to the City of Albuquerque (only about 20 miles to the north), Valencia County is included as part of the Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area and is a member of the Mid-Region Council of Governments (MRCOG). As the regional center for central New Mexico, Albuquerque provides many of the specialized needs and services of Valencia County residents. The Village of Los Lunas and City of Belen act as the two primary commercial and service centers within the County and provide more day-to-day goods and service options for County residents. Other incorporated municipalities include the Town of Peralta, Village of Bosque Farms, and the City of Rio Communities.

Figure 1: Map of Valencia County



VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Figure 2: Rio Grande Valley Portion of Valencia County



VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

In addition to its bordering counties, Valencia County contains a portion of both Isleta Pueblo and Laguna Pueblo, which are located in the northern portion of the County. Isleta Pueblo is one of the largest pueblos in the state, and owns and operates the popular Isleta Resort Casino, the Eagle Golf Course, and the Isleta Lakes Recreational Complex. The presence of the pueblos creates a de-facto barrier to development on the northern side of the County.

The geography of Valencia County is characterized by its wide variety of eye-catching and awe-inspiring views. The natural features of the County include the massive Manzano Mountains to the east, the Rio Grande and its fertile Bosque which bisects the County, and the Rio Puerco valley and its sprawling mesa vistas to the west. Valencia County is considered part of the Rio Abajo valley, the area of the Rio Grande which is below Santa Fe.

HISTORY

Early History

The area comprising present-day Valencia County has been occupied for thousands of years. Petroglyphs found on the historic Tomé Hill date from as early as 3000 BC through the 17th century, spanning from the cultural practices of Native cultures to the early Spanish presence in modern-day Valencia County. The current populations of Pueblo peoples formally settled the region around 1500, utilizing irrigation techniques that continue on to this day.

Spanish Colonization and the Establishment of Valencia County

Spanish presence in the region began with the arrival of Francisco Vázquez de Coronado expedition in 1540. Over the 17th and 18th centuries, a stream of settlers followed El Camino Real to the region to establish farmsteads. Spanish colonial presence was marked by the Pueblo Revolt, which expelled all Spanish settlers in 1680. Spanish soldiers and settlers returned in 1692.

Several of the communities which now exist in Valencia County were established during this later Spanish colonization effort and operated as part of the primarily agriculture-based economy. The first settlement in present day Valencia County was Tomé founded in 1739, while Belen was officially recognized as a settlement in 1740. Regular raids from Apache, Comanche, and Navajo tribes took place throughout the area until early in the 19th century, but despite the danger, the region grew with additional settlers. Today, all or portions of eight Spanish and Mexican land grants lie within Valencia County; however, few remain under control by the heirs of the original grant.

Antonio Jose Luna was instrumental in establishing the village of Los Lunas in 1808 when he acquired the land by laying claim to the original San Clemente grant. The area grew as the Luna family attracted additional families and workers to the area to support their growing sheep operation. The Luna family used the influence they gained within the community to have the County seat moved from Tomé to Los Lunas in 1876.

Establishment of Valencia County

The first formal borders for the County were created in 1844 under Mexican rule (Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821). At the time, the area known as Nuevo Méjico stretched from Texas to California. The County was named for Juan de Valencia, who settled the area in the 1660s.

Territorial Status and the US Civil War

New Mexico was formally incorporated as a US territory following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the end of the Mexican American War in 1848. In 1852, the Territorial Legislature of New Mexico made Valencia one of the original seven counties. Valencia County later played a part in the Civil War, when in 1862, during the height of the War, Confederate and Union forces battled at Peralta. The Confederate Army retreated to the south, with additional fighting taking place near La Joya, just south of the City of Belen.

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In 1880, the arrival of the railroad created economic opportunities for most of New Mexico. The railroad's arrival attracted new residents and wealth to Valencia County - particularly Belen, which continues to serve as a major hub on the BNSF railway. For nearly a century, Belen was the largest residential and commercial center, and one of the largest agricultural centers in Valencia County.

Statehood and Current Boundaries

New Mexico formally became a state in 1912. At the time, Valencia County extended from the Manzano Mountains to the Arizona border. This large geographic boundary led to distinctly different regions and centers of economic and political activity, with additional County facilities based in a western annex in Grants to provide adequate services to the distant populations. However, the primary County government services and facilities were more concentrated in and along the Rio Grande valley where the majority of the population resided.

The designation of Route 66 in 1926 brought with it additional growth and development to the County. For the first 10 years of its existence, Route 66 used Main Street in downtown Los Lunas, as well as present-day NM Highway 6. Route 66 was realigned in 1937 and bypassed Valencia County in an effort to reduce the total travel time for motorists. During the 10 years before it was re-routed, Route 66 brought hundreds of thousands of travelers through the Village of Los Lunas, spurring the creation of many businesses designed to serve the traveling motorists.

The County's boundaries were divided and reduced multiple times, most recently in 1981 when Cibola County was annexed out of a portion of Valencia County's western half. Although Valencia County was significantly reduced in size, operations became more manageable for the County government as the majority of the population was now concentrated in the Rio Grande valley.

HISTORIC PLACES

Hundreds of years of settlement has created a variety of historic assets that tell the story of Valencia County. Some of the County's historic assets are officially recognized through the State Register of Cultural Properties and the National Register of Historic Places. The communities of Valencia County have 22 individually registered places, including El Cerro Tome Site and the Belen Hotel.

In addition to the historic properties, the County contains several historic trails and Scenic Byways. El Camino Real (meaning Royal Road or King's Highway) served as the main road for the Spanish caravans for over three hundred years and originally extended 1,150 miles from Mexico City to Santa Fe. Historic Route 66 was located along present-day NM Highway 6 from 1926 until its realignment in 1937. The Abo Pass Trail connected the Salt Missions Trail of Torrance County and El Camino Real in the southeast portion of Valencia County.

DEMOGRAPHICS AND SOCIOECONOMICS

Total Population

As of the 2020 Census, the total population of Valencia County was 76,205. Of that total, about 54% live in unincorporated areas. Per the projections contained in the most recent *Metropolitan Transportation Plan* from MRCOG (Connections 2040), Valencia County is expected to grow by about 5,000 residents, or about 6.5%, between 2016 and 2040. The majority of the growth is expected to occur in incorporated areas, and the Village of Los Lunas in particular. See the chapters on Community Services, Economic Development, and Transportation for additional discussion on the impacts of population changes over time.

Table 1: Valencia County Population, 2016 & 2040

Area	2016	2040	Total Growth	Annual Growth
Valencia County (Total)	76,484	81,451	6.5%	0.3%
Unincorporated Areas	41,415	42,941	3.7%	0.2%

Population by Community

Table 2 provides the most recent municipal estimates from the US Census Bureau. As of 2019, the Village of Los Lunas was the largest incorporated place in Valencia County, with just over 16,000. Though Los Lunas only experienced modest growth since 2010, the magnitude of construction at the time of this plan's development indicates increased housing demand.

Note on Data Sources

The population data contained in this section are taken from three sources. Note that the Comprehensive Plan was completed before the final release of 2020 Census data.

- Age dynamics data are taken from the UNM GPS.
- Population projections are from MRCOG, which produces regional and County-level forecasts every five years. The base year for the population projections is 2016.
- Data on race, ethnicity, and economic conditions are from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey.

Table 2: Population by Incorporated Municipality

Municipality	2010 Census	2019 Estimate
Belen	7,269	7,416
Bosque Farms	3,904	3,888
Los Lunas	14,835	16,061
Peralta	3,660	3,584
Rio Communities	4,723	4,552
Valencia County	76,569	76,205*

*2020 Census

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Table 3 compares population totals from the 2010 Census and 2015-2019 American Community Survey for unincorporated communities, which are formally referred to as Census Designated Places (CDPs). There are 16 recognized CDPs across Valencia County, some of which are historic agricultural communities such as Tomé, while others such as Meadow Lake and Las Maravillas are relatively newer communities. The largest CDPs in Valencia County are Los Chavez and El Cerro Mission. The community of Tierra Grande, though not a Census-designated CDP, is home to more than 300 residents.

Table 3: Population by Unincorporated Community

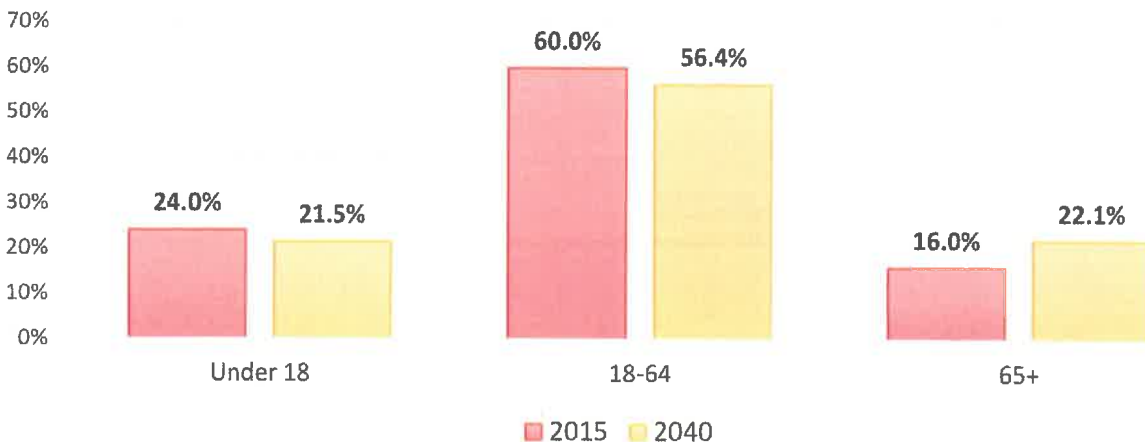
Community	2010 Census	ACS 2015-2019	Community	2010 Census	ACS 2015-2019
Adelino	823	919	Los Chaves	5,446	6,109
Casa Colorada	272	125	Madrone	707	590
Chical	107	108	Meadow Lake	4,708	3,832
El Cerro	2,953	3,202	Monterey Park	1,567	1,600
El Cerro Mission	4,657	4,170	Pueblitos	794	314
Highland Meadows	624	451	Sausal	1,056	1,566
Jarales	2,475	2,026	Tomé	1,867	1,988
Las Maravillas	1,628	1,723	Valencia	2,192	2,018

Population by Age

Age dynamics are a critical issue in Valencia County. In particular, population totals by age follow a pattern typical across New Mexico where the number of senior citizens is expected to rise while residents of workforce participation age is expected to shrink. As of 2015, about 24% of the population is under the age of 18, while 16% is 65 years or older. By 2040, the youth population shrinks to 21% while the senior population increases to 22%.

If these population dynamics continue, Valencia County will be home to thousands of additional senior citizens relative to today's total. Such growth in older populations will create a significant increase in demand for senior services and medical care. At the same time, a declining youth population would mean lower school enrollment, while lower labor force participation rates could have negative effects on the County economy and create a shortage of workers in key industries such as healthcare.

Figure 3: Share of Population by Age



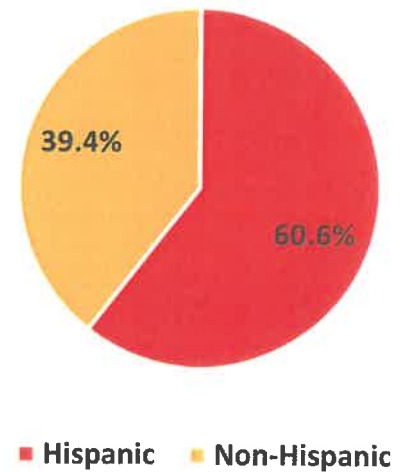
Race and Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity, as defined and categorized by the US Census Bureau, are self-identification terms in which residents choose the race or races with which they most closely identify and indicate whether or not they are of Hispanic or Latino origin (ethnicity). The breakdown of Valencia County by race and ethnicity can be found in Table 4. Overall a lower share of the County population identifies as white non-Hispanic than the state overall (32.6% versus 37.4%). Despite its proximity to the adjacent Pueblos, Valencia County has about 5% less Native American residents as compared to the State at a total of 9.5%. Overall, 60.6% of the population identifies as Hispanic in Valencia County (see Figure 4). Note that a share of the population considers itself Hispanic and non-white.

Table 4: Share of Population by Race

Figure 4: Percent Hispanic Population

Race	New Mexico	Valencia County
White (Non-Hispanic)	37.4%	32.6%
White (Hispanic)	37.4%	50.4%
Black/African American	2.1%	1.4%
Native American	9.5%	4.3%
Asian	1.6%	0.9%
Native Hawaiian / Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.0%
Some other Race	8.7%	7.1%
Two or More Races	3.3%	3.4%
TOTAL	100%	100%



Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey

Language Spoken at Home

About 30% of Valencia County residents speak a language other than English at home. The share of households that speak Spanish is slightly higher than the state average, while the share of non-English and non-Spanish speakers will be below the state average (2.8% versus 7.4%).

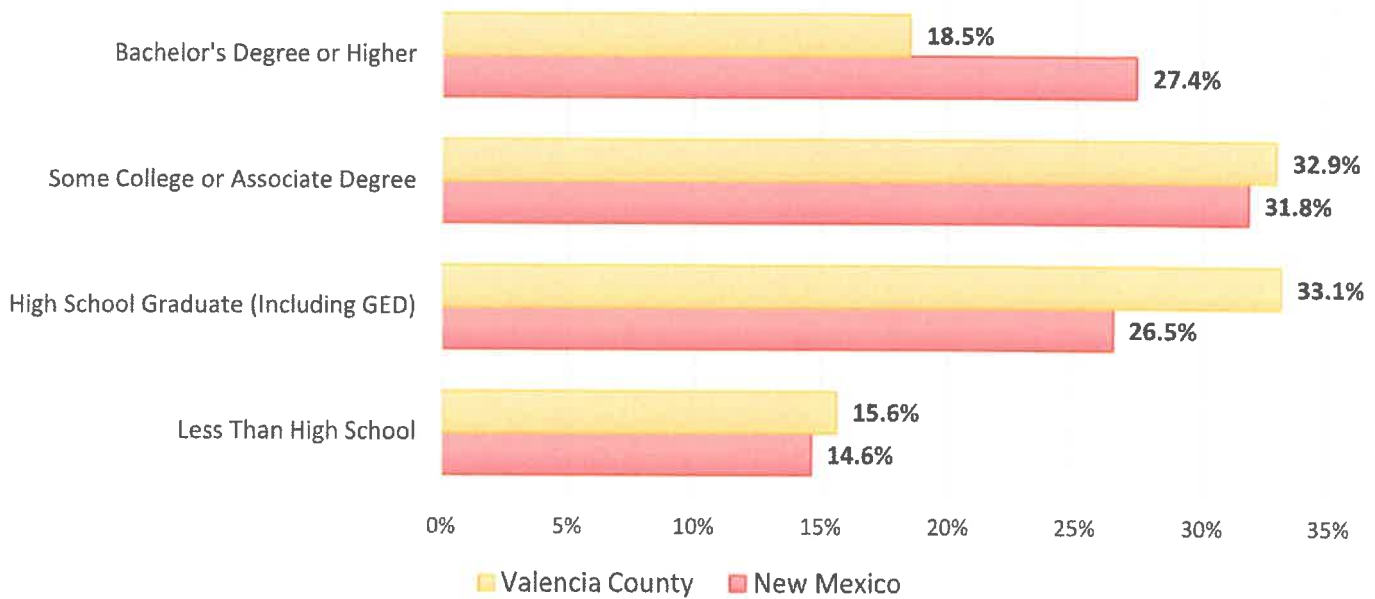
Table 5: Language Spoken at Home

Language	New Mexico	Valencia County
English	66.0%	69.4%
Spanish	26.6%	27.8%
Other Language	7.4%	2.8%
TOTAL	100%	100%

Educational Attainment

Valencia County residents have lower levels of educational attainment, on average, than New Mexico residents overall. In particular, Valencia County has a lower share of residents with a bachelor’s degree or higher than the state average. However, the vast majority of Valencia County residents (84.5%) hold at least a high school diploma, and a relatively high share of Valencia County residents have an associate degree or at least some college education. This high level of exposure to college may be the product of the UNM-Valencia campus and the relative ease of access to college-level instruction.

Figure 5: Educational Attainment for Population 25 years and Older



Economic Indicators

Valencia County residents have lower per capita and median household incomes, and longer commute times as compared to both Bernalillo County and the state as a whole. However, the County does have a lower poverty rate than compared to the overall state total. For more detailed discussion on development opportunities, jobs by industry, and other economic indicators, see the Economic Development chapter.

Table 6: Selected Economic Characteristics

	Valencia County	Bernalillo County	New Mexico
Percent Employed (16 and over)	49.2%	58.4%	53.5%
Per Capita Income	\$23,675	\$30,734	\$27,230
Median Household Income	\$48,945	\$53,329	\$49,754
Mean Commute Time (minutes)	28.4	22.4	22.3
Poverty Rate	17.6%	15.5%	18.2%

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Public engagement is essential to creating a Comprehensive Plan that reflects the vision, goals, and challenges of Valencia County. Through a series of online meetings and virtual open houses, community members were allowed to directly communicate with project planners and County staff. In addition to online meetings, community members and business owners were encouraged to provide input via an online survey during spring 2021. Highlights from the survey results are contained in this section, while the results from the subject-specific questions can be found in each chapter. A complete set of survey responses can be found in the Appendix.

PHASE 1: INFORMATION GATHERING

Virtual Public Meetings

To kick-start the public engagement process, Valencia County held two virtual community meetings and invited community members, elected officials, and stakeholders to provide their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities faced by the County. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these public meetings were shifted from in-person events to online formats to ensure the safety of all involved. Meetings were held on March 23 and 24, 2021 and featured an overview presentation of the purpose and scope of the Comprehensive Plan, key topics and issue areas covered in the Plan, and a demographic and economic snapshot of the conditions in Valencia County today.

The ultimate purpose of these virtual public meetings was to learn about key issues and priorities for community members across Valencia County, hear what needs to be addressed in the Plan, and to educate the public on the benefits as well as the limitations of the Comprehensive Plan. Each virtual public meeting featured question and answer sessions and open discussion.

Facebook Live Open Houses

In an effort to increase public participation in the comprehensive planning process, Valencia County held a series of engagement events using Facebook Live. These events acted as virtual open houses and allowed for County residents to join and ask questions directly to County staff and planners. The Facebook Live events were held on April 15 from 12-1 PM and 6-7 PM.

Following a brief overview of the Plan and its content by staff, the floor was opened for attendees to ask questions or give comments through the chat function. Questions were addressed in real time by staff and the consulting team and discussed in the comments section by other attendees.



DISCUSSION AND PUBLIC INPUT

General Priorities

Comments from the public meetings and virtual open houses were generally focused on the challenges related to balancing future growth and maintaining Valencia County's agricultural heritage and lifestyle, as well as areas of concern and desired services and amenities. Specific concerns included water availability and the potential for development to take away water from the "greenbelt" area of the Rio Grande valley.

When posed a question regarding what services are currently lacking in the County, responses ranged from recreational opportunities to educational and cultural programming. Ideas for potential programming included establishing community gardens and opportunities for students to learn about sustainable farming practices. Another popular idea was the development of an Expo Center with performance space for rodeos, riding competitions, exhibitions, and training and educational space for area youth.

Growth and Development Patterns

Significant conversation revolved around the tension between protecting the greenbelt and allowing for the creation of additional jobs and the presence of new services. While some attendees expressed strong desire to keep Valencia County rural, other attendees commented that it is important that Valencia County not limit private property rights and embrace some level of new development. One attendee commented that the County needs to use the prospect of additional growth as an opportunity to impose stronger requirements on developers, including community services such as parks and curb and gutter. According to this perspective, if the County does not demand this infrastructure, the public pays for its installation later. Another attendee acknowledged the funding constraints for public services and commented that accommodating growth is a means of enhancing revenue without raising taxes. In this person's opinion, the key is to ensure the County can grow thoughtfully.

Valencia County Demographics

Multiple attendees asked about the impacts of changing demographics and the likely higher number of retirees over time. One attendee saw the potential for retirees from outside the County as an economic development opportunity. Multiple attendees recognized that younger residents are disinclined to continue family agricultural practices and that other economic opportunities need to be created to retain and attract young adults.

Emergency Services

The various services provided by Valencia County were a major topic of discussion. Multiple attendees voiced concerns about the provision of emergency services and asserted that adequate funding for first responders should be prioritized. Staff noted that Valencia County only has four sheriff's deputies on patrol during each shift.

Recreational Opportunities

Multiple attendees identified a lack of entertainment options and activities for youth. Sports leagues, community gardens, and community centers with children's programming or commercial entertainment options were all suggested as potential opportunities for local youth to spend their time if such options were provided. Other common responses included additional recreational opportunities, both in terms of trails and walking/biking options.

COMMUNITY SURVEY

To collect further feedback from Valencia County residents, an online survey was posted for two months in spring 2021. The community survey was comprised of 18 questions and received 450 responses. The highest share of respondents (nearly 40%) were residents of Los Lunas, with the remainder of responses distributed throughout Valencia County. The primary age group that took the survey was between 45 and 64 years old. The following charts show the demographics of the community survey respondents.

Table 7: What is your age?

Answer	Percent
Under 18	0.0%
18-24	2.2%
25-34	13.6%
35-44	23.6%
45-64	43.4%
65 and over	17.2%
Total	100%

WHAT IS YOUR AGE?

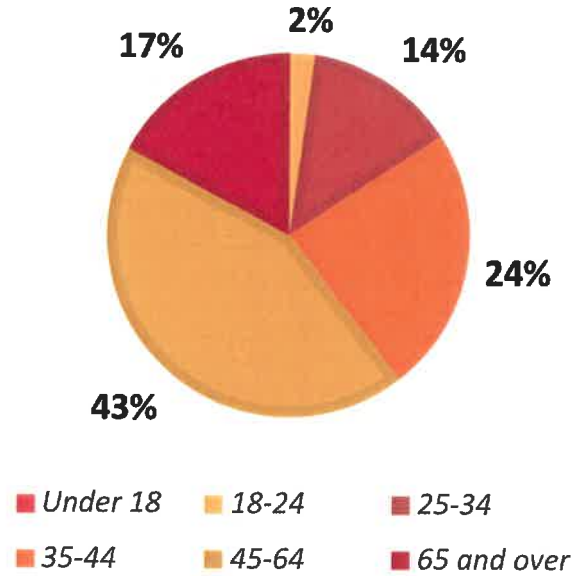


Table 8: What is the name of your home community?

Community	Percent	Community	Percent
Adelino	12.9%	Los Lunas	39.0%
Belen	0.2%	Meadow Lake	4.2%
Bosque Farms	5.1%	Peralta	3.1%
El Cerro	2.9%	Rio Communities	6.9%
El Cerro Mission	2.7%	Tierra Grande	2.2%
Jarales	2.0%	Tomé	8.2%
Las Maravillas	1.3%	Valencia	1.8%
Los Chavez	3.1%	Other	4.2%

Perspective on Quality of Life

The following questions were posed to survey respondents and public meetings attendees regarding their perspective on the current and projected quality of life in Valencia County.

Best Parts About Living in Valencia County

Table 9: What do you like most about living in Valencia County?

Answer Choices	Percent
Rural character/small town feel	69.3%
Sense of community	25.8%
Affordable/low housing costs	18.0%
Access to outdoors/recreational opportunities	14.2%
Proximity to employment	13.6%
Good place to raise children	11.3%
Other	8.4%
Total	100%

When asked the question of what they like most about living in Valencia County, survey respondents strongly indicated that the rural, small town character, as well as the strong sense of community and culture, as the primary reasons they enjoy living in the County. Respondents also indicated that they enjoyed that the County is close to Albuquerque but has enough separation from the city to feel rural.

When posed with the question during community meetings, community members responded that it is a beautiful place to live, people are wonderful to interact with, and that growth is taking place in the right direction. Multiple community members noted the County's rural, agricultural setting, and simple lifestyle, with one attendee calling the County the "gem of the Rio Grande corridor."

Present and Future Quality of Life

Table 10: From your perspective, how would you rate the quality of life in Valencia County?

Answer Choices	Percent
Excellent	10.4%
Good	54.7%
Fair	29.1%
Poor	5.8%
Total	100%

Table 11: Do you believe the quality of life in Valencia County is improving, declining, or remaining the same?

Answer Choices	Percent
Improving	26.2%
Declining	37.6%
Remaining the same	36.2%
Total	100%

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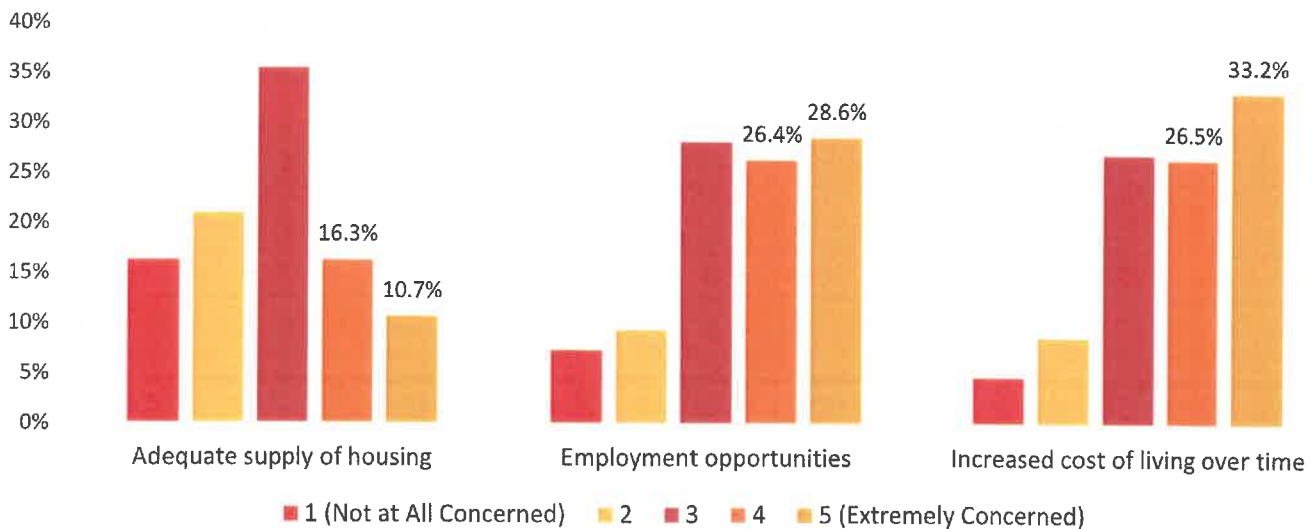
While Valencia County residents believe that their quality of life is high (only 6% of survey respondents indicated maintaining a low quality of life), their view for the future of the County is more pessimistic. Approximately 38% believe quality of life is declining while another 36% believe it is staying the same; by contrast, only 26% say quality of life is improving.

Perhaps the leading cause of the viewpoint that Valencia County is declining is the concerns felt by residents regarding crime and safety. When asked their level of concern for the issues facing the County, almost 65% of survey respondents indicated crime and safety as being extremely concerning for the future of Valencia County. This response was almost double the amount of the next highest concern “increased cost of living,” which was indicated as extremely concerning by 33% of survey respondents. Overall, residents were more likely than not to be concerned about excess urban development and loss of rural character. A majority of respondents (about 55%) indicated they were either somewhat or extremely concerned about future employment opportunities.

Figure 6: How concerned are you about the following issues for the future in Valencia County? Part 1



Figure 7: How concerned are you about the following issues for the future in Valencia County? Part 2



PHASE 2: REVIEW OF DRAFT PLAN AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The second phase of outreach provided an opportunity for members of the public to provide input on Plan recommendations and priorities. Milestones during this phase of outreach included a public meeting, presentation to the County Commission in December 2021, and two Facebook Live events. A full draft of the Comprehensive Plan was posted online for public review as part of a 30 day public comment period beginning after the County Commission meeting on December 15.

PROJECT WEBSITE

To support the comprehensive planning process, the Project Team created a project website that served as an online resource for information on the Comprehensive Plan. Opportunities for the public to get involved were also posted regularly to the website, along with links to the community survey.



Welcome

Valencia County is kicking off an update to its Comprehensive Plan, an important policy document that will guide how the county will grow and use its land for the next 30 years. Ultimately, the Comprehensive Plan creates an opportunity to create a vision for the future of Valencia County through a community and data driven process.

The Valencia County Comprehensive Plan considers the community services and future growth associated with unincorporated portions of the county. This website will serve as a resource for information on the Comprehensive Plan and opportunities to get involved.



Get Involved!

Thank you to all who completed the Project Survey! The results are being processed and will be incorporated into the final draft of the Comprehensive Plan.

LAND USE

Current land use in Valencia County reflects historical development patterns, including the presence of Native communities, land grants and Hispanic agricultural communities, and the geographic landscape of the area. Most development is located along the Rio Grande Valley, with vast expanses of undeveloped land extending to the eastern and western boundaries of the County

Balancing the development pressures for growth in urban areas versus protecting the established character of the rural areas is a key issue facing Valencia County. To address these competing desires, this chapter outlines Priority Growth Areas where future development could be concentrated. In particular the intent of the Priority Growth Areas is to provide greater housing opportunities and services for County residents and to alleviate pressure for development in more rural and agricultural areas.

EXISTING LAND USE CONDITIONS

Current Land Use Activities

Valencia County is predominantly rural with large expanses of range land. Most of the population is located along the Rio Grande Valley that splits the County into an eastern and a western portion. Residential and agricultural land uses are distributed along the Rio Grande corridor, while commercial land uses are concentrated along I-25 and other major arterials.

Table 12 quantifies the most common land uses by category, based on an inventory maintained by MRCOG for the greater Albuquerque planning area. Other land use designations, including civic and community facilities, comprise small percentages of the total County land area. It is important to note that there are discrepancies between the existing land use inventory and the zoning district map (described below). A thorough review of current land uses should occur among Valencia County and MRCOG staff.

Overall, there are 683,623 total acres, or 1,068 square miles, of land in Valencia County. Approximately 80%, or 528,579 acres, of the County's total land area is designated by MRCOG as Dry Rangeland, a land use that is characterized largely by rural residential, ranches, fallow agriculture, as well as rural vacant land. Rangeland spans outward from the edges of the Rio Grande Valley, to both the eastern and western extent of the County boundaries.

Almost 8% of the County is designated as Open Space and Recreation. This land use designation includes all outdoor recreational facilities including plazas, sports fields, golf courses, skate parks, and trails, as well as state and federal parks and forest land. The Rio Grande corridor is predominantly designated as Agriculture - Irrigated, constituting approximately 3.2% (21,000 acres) of the total County land area. This land is mostly privately owned and consists of cultivated fields interspersed with rural residential uses.

Single family land uses are located along the Rio Grande corridor with some clusters on the mesas east and west of the Rio Grande corridor. The most densely populated areas are found in the northern region which include Los Lunas, Valencia, and Peralta. Overall, single-family residential uses encompass approximately 21,500 acres, or 3.2% of the total County land. The Urban Vacant land use designation includes vacant land or abandoned structures at least 2 acres in size and is generally associated with incorporated areas and recognized unincorporated communities. Urban Vacant is designated for more than 21,000 acres or 3.1% of total County land.

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Table 12: Existing Land Uses by Type

Land Use Designation	Acreage	Percent of Total Land Area
Rangeland – Dry	528,579	77.3%
Open Space and Recreation	50,325	7.4%
Single Family	21,548	3.2%
Urban Vacant	21,446	3.1%
Agriculture, irrigated	21,006	3.1%
Other	40,719	6.0%
Total	683,623	100.0%

Note: The land uses in this table include tribal lands and incorporated areas.

Zoning

There are a total of 14 zoning districts outlined within the Valencia County Zoning Code. These districts can be generally organized into broad categories that include Natural Resources Districts, Residential Districts, Commercial Districts, Industrial Districts, and Overlay Districts. Descriptions of the major zoning districts within these categories are detailed below and contained in Table 13. The Comprehensive Plan can play a role in guiding decisions on zoning change requests and clarifying policy choices when there are competing needs. If a Zoning Code update is undertaken, the Comprehensive Plan can also guide the revision of zoning districts and the allowable uses and densities in different parts of the County, including Priority Growth Areas.

Natural Resource Districts are those established to conserve, protect, develop, and manage natural resources. Natural Resource Districts are specifically intended to protect agricultural areas generally located along the Rio Grande greenbelt. These include a Mineral Resource District (MR) intended to provide for the exploration for and the subsequent extraction of resources and a Parks, Recreation, Open Space District (PRO) to accommodate recreational open spaces. A large portion of unincorporated Valencia County falls under the Outland District (OD) category, which contains generally undeveloped, un-platted lands. Low-density residential development and ranching activities are allowed in Outland District area, but other uses are site plan review and permit approval.

Residential Districts permit a variety of housing at densities in-line with the desired character of the area in which they reside. The Rural Residential Districts (RR-1, RR-2) constitute the most commonly zoned residential parcels and are intended to accommodate single-family dwellings on large lots along with smaller-scale farming/ranching uses. A Suburban Residential District (SR) is also established to provide for more medium density suburban residential development including single-family, duplex, and multi-family dwellings in locations generally adjacent to urban centers. The numbers in the districts represent the maximum density (i.e. no more than 1 dwelling unit per acre in RR-1 and no more than 1 dwelling unit per 2 acres in RR-2). The Agricultural Preservation (AP) District, which is intended to maintain the agricultural character of the greenbelt area, permits residences with a maximum density of 1 dwelling unit per 5 acres.

Commercial Districts set aside areas for commercial businesses at one of two scales: Neighborhood Commercial District (C-1) and Community Commercial District (C-2). C-1 is intended to serve rural neighborhoods in the County while C-2 is intended to serve larger communities and allows for more intensive activities.

Industrial Districts permit a variety of more intense land uses including manufacturing, warehousing, and processing facilities. Three Industrial Districts allow for a range of intensities. These include the Resource Industrial District (I-1), the Light/General Industrial District (I-2), and the Heavy Industrial District (I-3).

Overlay Districts may be applied over one or more previously established base zoning districts and are intended to establish additional or stricter standards and criteria to protect a specific resource or guide development within a special area. County overlay districts are in place to provide additional development standards for floodplains,

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airport encroachment areas, wireless transmission facilities and historical areas. In addition, the code provides for a Planned Development District (PD) that allows flexibility for developments that provide public benefits. In practice, PD Districts are prevalent across the County, though other overlay districts are not widely used.

Limitations or Issues with Current Zoning

The current set of zoning districts do not allow for the rural-to-developed area transition that is needed within the County. A transect oriented zoning system that places all of the elements of the built environment in useful order, from most rural to most developed, could aid in defining the varying characters desired within the County. Areas identified as Priority Growth Areas (described later in this chapter) should be zoned to allow a greater mix and intensity of development with subsequent districts that transition away from centers, decreasing the permissive densities and intensities of development.

An additional limitation is that currently there are no official mixed-use district and it is challenging to combine residential uses with commercial or office activities on a single parcel. A mixed-use zoning district that would allow for more opportunities to provide commercial uses like small retail and services within close proximity to residential uses should be contemplated within the County. In particular, such a mixed-use zoning category could help accommodate and manage growth if applied within Priority Growth Areas. The regulation of existing commercial, industrial, and residential districts could also be evaluated to ensure the standards allow for the appropriate transitions from rural to developed to occur. The County should evaluate whether refinements are needed to the current district or if the creation of entirely new districts are needed. Similar evaluations should be conducted for non-residential districts to ensure zoning districts provide an appropriate mix of desired commercial and industrial uses.

Finally, secondary or accessory dwelling units are not addressed clearly in the existing zoning code, though such uses are desirable in communities with housing needs and aging populations, such as Valencia County. Secondary units are increasingly common requested land uses among Valencia County landowners and should be considered as part of a zoning code update.

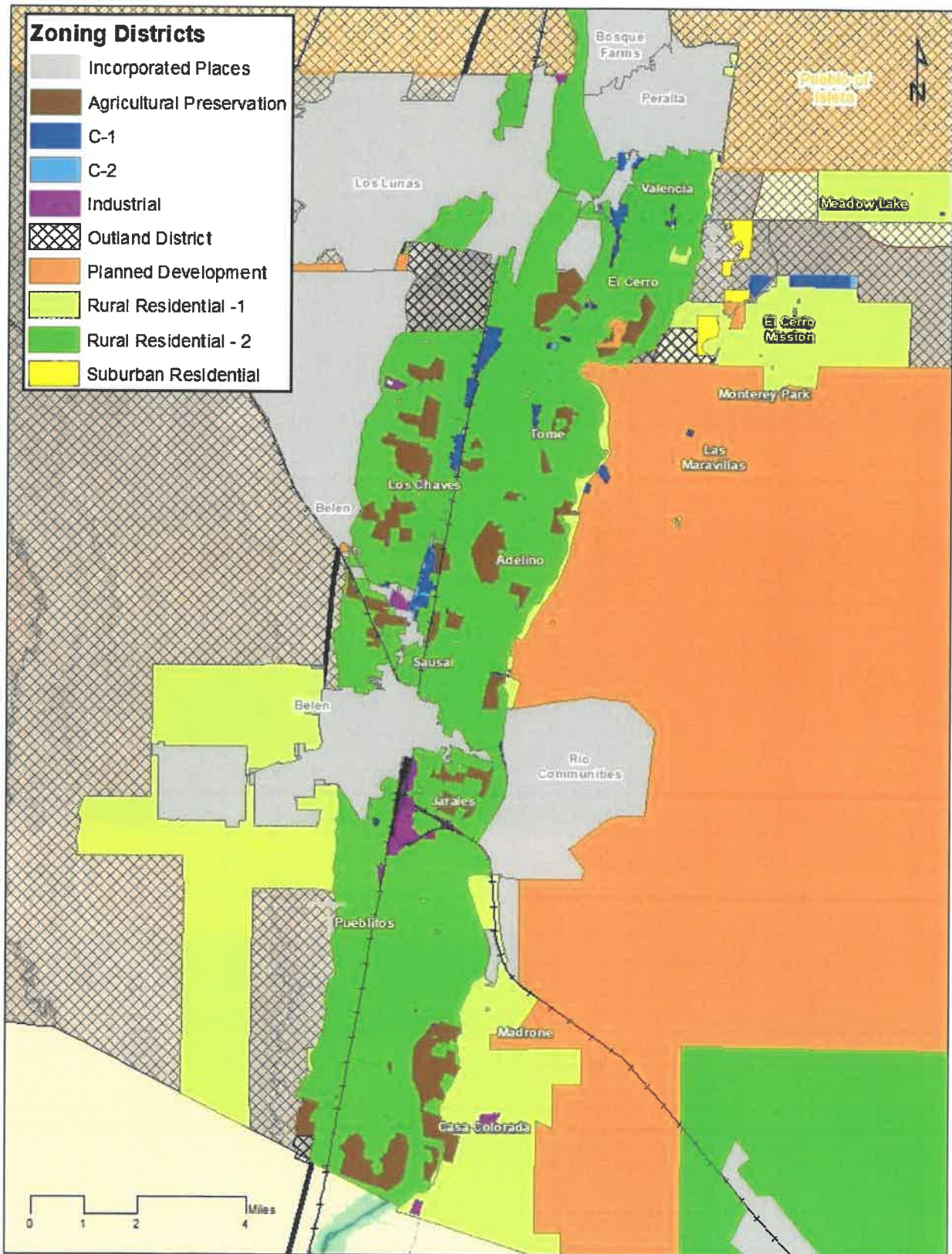
Zoning and Agricultural Land

A variety of zoning strategies could be utilized to protect and preserve low-density agricultural communities from encroaching urban and suburban development in order to maintain existing community character. A crucial step to preserving agricultural lands is to ensure that the lineup of zoning districts allows for appropriate ranges of development. For example, a larger variety of housing types should be accommodated within areas deemed appropriate, such as Priority Growth Areas and unincorporated communities. Remaining zoning districts should allow more flexibility in order to create transitions between agricultural lands and commercial areas.

Given the water availability concerns and the challenges associated with farming as an economically viable activity, some residents have expressed interest in converting small-scale farms into large-lot residential. However, there is a perception that AP zoning is holding back productive land uses. The County should further evaluate allowing for more zone changes from AP to RR-2 as such zoning districts would allow for housing that is compatible with the surrounding context. The AP zone district could also accommodate a larger variety of housing choices such as cottage or cluster development that naturally protect agricultural resources by requiring residential uses to grouped on a development site with the extra land allotted for agriculture or open space.

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Figure 8: Zoning Districts in Valencia County



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Table 13: Acres of Land by Zoning District

Zoning District Designation		Acreage
Natural Resource Districts	Agricultural Preservation District (AP)	4,700.6
	Mineral Resource District (MR)	292.2
	Parks, Recreation, Open Space District (PRO)	194.2
	Outland District (OD)	204,327.5
Residential Districts	Rural Residential District (RR-1)	29,560.1
	Rural Residential District (RR-2)	67,947.5
	Suburban Residential District (SR)	1,392.0
Commercial Districts	Neighborhood Commercial District (C-1)	1,553.0
	Community Commercial District (C-2)	1,911.7
Industrial Districts	Resource Industrial District (I-1)	750.3
	Light/General Industrial District (I-2)	11.3
	Heavy Industrial District (I-3)	4,078.7
	Municipal and Municipal Lands	13,026.7
	Solid Waste	121.2
Overlay Districts	Wireless Communication	3.9
	Planned Development (PD)	113,796.5
	Floodplain	0.0
	Airport Encroachment	0.0
	Historic	0.0
Total		443,667

Note: Total acres includes all unincorporated areas of the County. All portions of unincorporated Valencia County that do not have an identified zoning district are considered to be Outland District. Since zoning districts are subject to change, this table and the above map should be referenced for general planning purposes only. See the Valencia County Zoning District Map for the most up-to-date information.

Land Use Management

General Administrative Structure

Several different entities manage land use within Valencia County including the County Commission, County Manager, Planning and Zoning Commission, and the Community Development Department, which includes Planning and Zoning and Code Enforcement. Specific roles and powers are divided among these managing entities.

Planning and Zoning Commission

There are five members of the Valencia County Planning and Zoning Commission, including one from each Commission District. Members are appointed by the Board of County Commissioners. The purpose of the County Planning and Zoning Commission is to promote a comprehensive planning process that guides and coordinates harmonious development. The Planning and Zoning Commission regularly holds public meetings and hearings on land use and development decisions and submits preliminary written reviews and recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners, which has the final approval authority on most land use and development decisions.

Planning & Zoning and Code Enforcement

Valencia County staff play a key role in the health and safety of Valencia County residents by administering the zoning code and ensuring buildings and properties meet required codes and standards. Planning staff oversee the development review process and participate in long-range planning efforts to ensure the County develops in an orderly manner. County planning staff rely heavily on the Comprehensive Plan when making decisions related to land use and development proposals. Code enforcement staff ensure that buildings meet all code requirements and issue floodplain certificates for buildings located in designated floodplain areas.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Community survey results and input from public meetings regarding current and future land uses reflect the general desire to both preserve small-scale and rural development patterns while increasing access to services and shopping opportunities. The key is the scale at which these services are developed, with local restaurants and smaller-scale retail desired over large retail shopping opportunities among survey respondents. In addition, there is a strong desire for greater open space and recreation opportunities. Other comments included a desire for accessory dwelling units to allow for intergenerational housing. Some residents also expressed that agricultural activity is decreasingly viable and that younger generations are less interested in pursuing farming.

As part of the community survey, respondents were asked whether they would like to see more, the same, or less of various land use types and businesses. The land uses and business types for which more opportunities are desired are indicated in Figure 9, while Figure 10 indicates the land uses and business types for which fewer establishments or sites are desired in the future. The most commonly desired land uses are additional recreational opportunities, grocery stores, and small-sale retail and restaurants. The least desired future land uses among respondents include large-scale retail and suburban-style housing development.

Figure 9: Most Desired Land Uses and Business Types

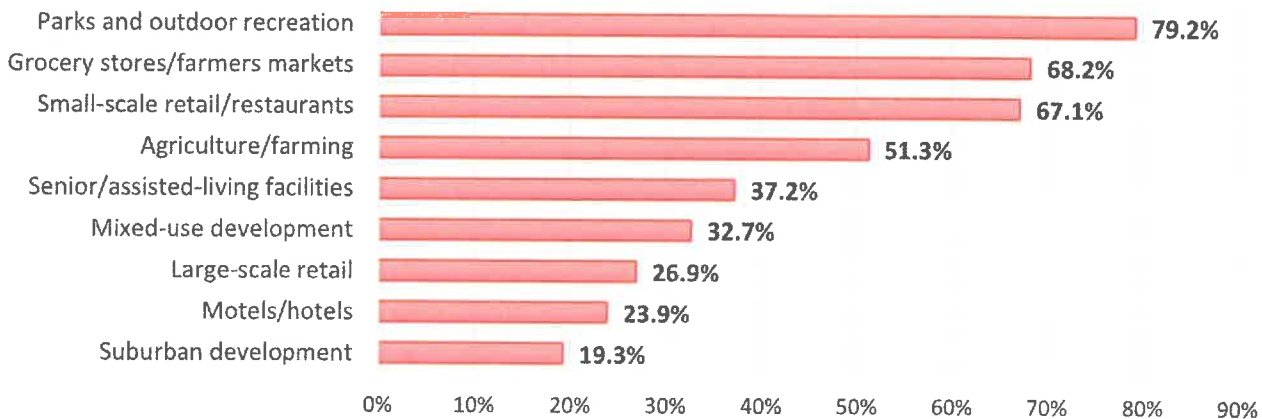
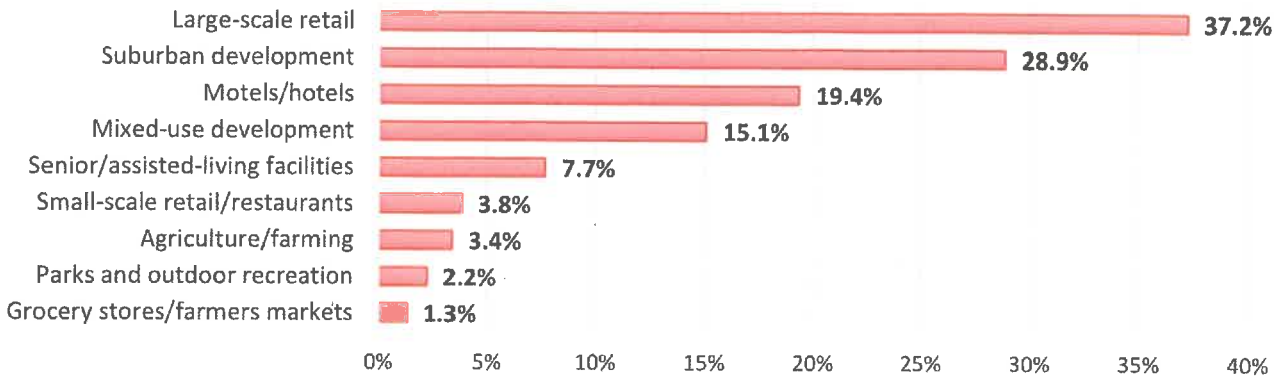


Figure 10: Least Desired Additional Land Use and Business Types



LAND USE CHALLENGES

There are a number of challenges that Valencia County must balance in order to preserve the established rural character and enhance local quality of life as new growth occurs and as demographics change. In addition to balancing urban development patterns and rural character, Valencia County also faces the challenge of providing more commercial opportunities and services to rural areas, as well as barriers to more flexible development forms, including mixed-use development.

Balancing Urban Development Patterns and Rural Character

Valencia County has traditionally had a rural development pattern characterized by large swaths of irrigated, agricultural production lands and dispersed low-density and large-lot residential development along the Rio Grande Valley. However, the general growth in the Albuquerque metropolitan area and recent housing development in Los Lunas, the growing presence of several large companies such as Facebook, and a new planned interchange and river crossing place pressure for new housing and commercial development in unincorporated areas.

Historic Preservation

Historic preservation is an ongoing topic of discussion within long-established communities. Structures that have historical value should be preserved and maintained in order to celebrate the cultural heritage of the area. Historic preservation methods and strategies can include community assessments to identify historic assets and developing a program to manage and protect those assets. Historic structures and properties can also obtain registration on the National Register of Historic Places and the state Register of Cultural Properties so that the historic significance can be recognized and considered in future planning and to open doors to further assistance through rehabilitation tax credit programs.

Lack of Services

Many rural areas across Valencia County are characterized by single-family homes located on large lots in areas that lack access to community services and neighborhood serving retail. While dollar stores and mini-marts are present in communities like Meadow Lake and El Cerro - Monterey Park, residents must drive to Los Lunas or Belen to reach community facilities such as a library or medical clinic or a full-service grocery store. Residents in Highland Meadows, located in the northwestern corner of the County, must drive 30 minutes to reach any commercial retail or services in Los Lunas or via I-40 to Albuquerque. Providing more commercial services closer to these communities will increase the livability and quality of life experienced by residents.

Impacts of Interchange Project

The proposed I-25 interchange and river crossing project along Morris Rd may lead to increased land values and commercial development. However, most of the land adjacent to the planned alignment is agricultural and current zoning does not allow for commercial land uses. It is anticipated that an influx of zoning map amendment applications may occur in order to rezone these areas to a higher density zone district, and guidance is needed on appropriate land uses along this corridor.

Zoning as a Barrier to Higher Density Housing and Mixed-use Development

Currently, the County Zoning Code acts as a barrier to creating higher density activities or mixed-use development that allows a variety of land uses such as commercial, office and housing to co-locate on a single development parcel. The Zoning Code also does not easily provide for alternative housing including multi-family housing and senior housing. In addition, the code does not provide any reductions in land area for duplexes despite the fact that this type of development allows for enhanced multi-modal accessibility and often occurs in more urban and suburban landscapes. Decreasing the minimum lot size requirement for duplex and multiplex development would allow for increased density where appropriate and provide more affordable housing opportunities. Other barriers include the lack of a mixed-use zone district that allows for residential to be combined with commercial or office on a single parcel.

Environmental Concerns and Conservation

Managing growth is consistent with the desire to conserve open spaces and the need to minimize impacts to the natural environment. Among the considerations for Valencia County will be to ensure that new development does not take place in a manner that increases vulnerabilities to climate impacts, including increased risks over time of drought, wildfire, and flooding. Conservation efforts also provide community benefits, including reduced air and water pollution, preservation of natural habitats, and enhanced community aesthetics, while simultaneously creating opportunities for recreational activities. See the Environment & Natural Resources chapter for additional discussion.

Adequate Infrastructure to Rural Areas

Communities with low-density residential development patterns in places like Highland Meadows and on the eastern mesas were often developed with minimal long-range planning that would ensure adequate infrastructure capacity, parks and open space land, or zoning that would support neighborhood-serving commercial activities. Valencia County now confronts the needs for more widespread community services and upgraded infrastructure to meet travel demand and ensure adequate drainage infrastructure.

Development Patterns in Eastern Valencia County

A challenging issue for the County that has been present for 50 years is the more than 200,000 acres of land on the eastern mesa south of Meadow Lake that was marketed and sold by Tucson-based Horizon Land Corporation to thousands of individual property owners. Horizon was sued by the New Mexico Attorney General's Office in 1976 for alleged land fraud that misrepresented the conditions of the land. The landscape still bears the marks of platted roads from that time as this land remains undeveloped and unimproved. Properties in this area are extremely difficult to sell because of the poor conditions and lack of infrastructure. This has resulted in approximately 53,000 parcels that are delinquent on property taxes, according to the New Mexico Taxation and Revenue Department, with taxpayers missing out on almost \$11,000,000 of public funds over the last 50 years. Valencia County must now confront the many challenges associated with the premature platting and the absentee landowners, including poor lot configuration, drainage issues, and lack of infrastructure.

PRIORITY GROWTH AREAS

Purpose

As a means of managing future growth and balancing the needs for additional housing and retail opportunities with the desire to preserve the agricultural character of much of unincorporated Valencia County, this Comprehensive Plan identifies a series of Priority Growth Areas. These areas are specifically designated to capture regional growth in higher-density concentrations in order to protect rural land and better coordinate future infrastructure. Priority Growth Areas do not mean that additional housing or commercial activity should not take place in the greenbelt or agricultural areas. Rather, any new housing development in those areas should be at a scale that is consistent with existing land use practices. Priority Growth Areas may be reassessed on a regular basis and additional locations can be added as appropriate. Potential applications and benefits from the designation of Priority Growth Areas are described below.

Regional Activity Center Designations

The Priority Growth Areas expand upon the “Target” growth scenario contained in the Connections 2040 MTP. This regional growth scenario identifies key activity centers and locations for regional employment and additional development based on input from regional policy leaders and local plans and policies. Priority Growth Areas for Valencia County should be integrated into future regional planning efforts through MRCOG.

The Target growth scenario seeks to achieve three goals:

1. Target investments to strengthen regional activity centers, support a core transit network, and enable safe bicycle and pedestrian connections.
2. Achieve a healthy balance of jobs and housing east and west of the Rio Grande.
3. Preserve and protect open space, agricultural land, and rural communities.

Centers are categorized based on the type of activity and/or investment needed to help them thrive. The four activity center types include: *Regional Centers, Opportunity Centers, Reinvestment Centers, and Employment Centers.*

Growth Management Benefits

Direct Anticipated Growth to Priority Growth Areas

Priority Growth Areas are locations where higher density housing and commercial activity may be concentrated in order to protect existing rural residential and agricultural areas in the Rio Grande Valley. Allowances for higher density mixed-use zoning within Priority Growth Areas can aid in addressing several County challenges, including the accommodation of anticipated growth to areas deemed appropriate, thereby ensuring the stability of agricultural and rural areas, creating a more balanced pattern of housing and jobs, as well as directing growth to areas that have adequate infrastructure systems in place.

Creating incentives that further encourage infill development within Priority Growth Area would spur growth in these areas. Incentives could include streamlining approvals by authorizing administrative approvals of compliant development under a certain threshold and allowing more flexible land uses and development standards within these areas. Creating a fast-track process for zone changes within the Priority Growth Areas could also encourage growth to locate in these areas.

Preserve and Protect Agricultural Land and Existing Community Character

Unincorporated communities within the County have a distinct identity that often stems from a long history dating to the earliest Spanish settlement. In particular, agricultural practices have dominated the landscape of the greenbelt for many generations and have historically been an important part of the regional economy. Development pressures

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to convert agricultural land to housing or commercial uses is evident; however, historical development patterns can be maintained by ensuring that new housing maintains the existing community character and general land use patterns. Accommodating future growth within the designated Priority Growth Areas will relieve pressure on these communities to convert agricultural land to other uses.

Coordination between Land Use and Infrastructure Investments

Priority Growth Areas can provide a way to concentrate regional facilities and services to designated places where growth is encouraged. Because of the vast extent of single-family development at very low densities across the mesas to the east and west of the greenbelt, challenges exist to provide adequate infrastructure connections and services to these far-flung areas. Coordination among various County departments is necessary to ensure future development is adequately provided for. Encouraging master-planned development in Priority Growth Areas would be an effective strategy to provide a more coordinated response to residential growth patterns and to provide public infrastructure and services in a cost-effective manner.

Priority Growth Area Locations

Table 14: Priority Growth Areas: Unincorporated Valencia County

Location	Source	Needs and Opportunities
Existing Priority Growth Areas		
Manzano Center – El Cerro Mission Rd & Manzano Expressway	MRCOG: Existing Opportunity Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New residential development west of Manzano Expressway. • Leverage public investments within the City of Rio Communities.
Belen Industrial – NM 304 and BNSF rail corridor	MRCOG: Existing Opportunity Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate for manufacturing/industrial; businesses are able to take advantage of the proximity to rail; potential for additional industrial growth. • An overpass of Jarales Rd has been considered that would improve rail access to the east side of the river. • Zoned residential to the west of the railroad tracks; however, additional development in the area is likely to be industrial.
Future Priority Growth Areas		
Las Maravillas - Rio del Oro Loop / Manzano Expressway	Comprehensive Plan outreach process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Services desired for nearby subdivisions and students traveling to and from UNM Valencia. • Appropriate location for additional housing.
West Mesa – South of NM 6 and west of I-25	Comprehensive Plan outreach process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spot development occurring along west NM 6 which could be organized as an activity center. • Proposed development in the area includes a 30 acre site with planned development zoning designation. around Camino Largo south of Arroyo Rd. The concept is for a sustainable shipping container development that could jump start development in the area; generally viewed as an opportunity. • Providing County services for the site will be difficult when the area first develops. Challenges include providing emergency response and roadway infrastructure.
Priority Growth Corridors		

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<p>North Manzano Expressway – El Cerro Mission Blvd and Meadowlake Rd</p>	<p>Comprehensive Plan outreach process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater commercial activity is appropriate in the general area, including the North Manzano Expressway Corridor from El Cerro Mission Blvd to Meadowlake Rd. • Land along corridor is zoned for commercial development.
<p>Meadowlake Rd – East of Los Lunas</p>	<p>Comprehensive Plan outreach process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater commercial activity is appropriate along the corridor to serve community needs.
<p>Morris Rd Corridor – Between I-25 and NM 47</p>	<p>Comprehensive Plan outreach process</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commercial activity is appropriate along the corridor as the new river crossing is constructed.

Table 15: Activity Centers in Incorporated Areas

Location	MRCOG Center Type	Definition
Los Lunas Rail Runner Station	Regional Center	Large regional market with existing employers and mix of uses. Currently served by public transit, or close to a regional transit station.
Downtown Belen	Reinvestment Center	Existing long-time hub of activity but targeted for relatively new redevelopment or additional activity.
Belen Airport	Opportunity Center	Growing center or one that is currently underutilized. Opportunity to become a regional mixed-use destination.
West Los Lunas		
Central New Mexico Rail Park	<i>Not identified by MRCOG</i>	Opportunity center for future industrial and transportation-related serves.

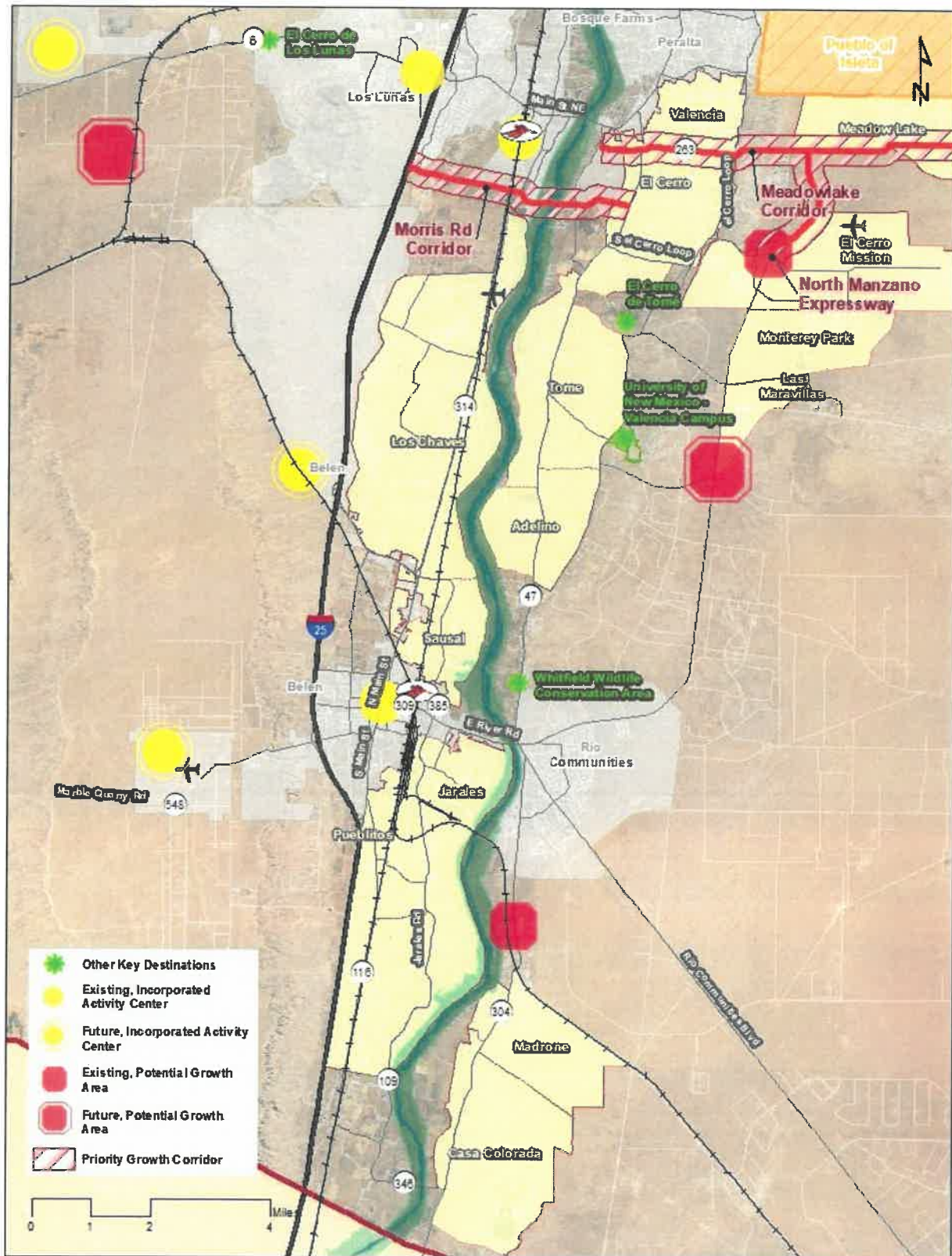
Other Development Considerations

The following issues may affect development patterns across the County and should be monitored over time:

- **Valencia County Regional Medical Facility:** The desired location for the proposed Valencia County Medical Center has not been established. The area around the facility will likely grow into an activity center.
- The **Central New Mexico Rail Park** is not identified by MRCOG as an activity center, though the area features significant opportunities for future economic development and may become a major employment hub in the coming decades.
- Continued **expansion of Facebook and growth in Los Lunas** will affect both economic development activities and housing demand in unincorporated areas of Valencia County.
- County staff discussed the possibility of the construction and potential economic development benefits of an **I-25 Frontage Rd** to the north of Aragon Rd in Belen. The corridor may be evaluated further and could be added to the list of Priority Growth Corridors.
- The **City of Rio Communities** is actively recruiting businesses and housing development and looks to leverage the fact that 90% of the City’s land area is designated as an Opportunity Zone. The designation that allows investors to get a deferment on their capital gains.

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Figure 11: Priority Growth Areas in Valencia County



LAND USE GOALS AND ACTION ITEMS

Goal 1: Capture regional growth in Priority Growth Areas to preserve the rural character of the County.

Action 1-1: Encourage higher-intensity development with concentrated job and commercial activity and additional housing in designated Priority Growth Areas.

Action 1-2: Encourage a wider variety of housing types such as townhouses, apartments, senior / assisted housing within Priority Growth Areas that provide opportunities for all socioeconomic segments of the population.

Action 1-3: Support the development of housing types that maintain the rural character such as single-family, cottage or cluster developments, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units outside of Priority Growth Areas.

Action 1-4: Update the Zoning Code to allow higher-density and mixed-use land use patterns within Priority Growth Areas. Discourage the development of low-density residential development as an inappropriate use in Priority Growth Areas.

Goal 2: Protect and enhance the historic character of Valencia County.

Action 2-1: Explore a historic community assessment that identifies existing historic assets.

Action 2-2: Establish a historic preservation program that allows for the designation of historic landmarks and districts and that provides assistance through historic tax credits.

Action 2-3: Evaluate and update existing zone district regulations to ensure permissive uses and development standards so that the existing / desired development character is maintained.

Goal 3: Preserve and protect the County's agricultural heritage.

Action 3-1: Maintain, to the extent feasible, land that is suitable for agriculture using a variety of techniques, including conservation easements, acquisition of properties, and agricultural zoning, to discourage non-agricultural development in these areas.

Action 3-2: Periodically evaluate the Agricultural Preservation overlay zone district for accuracies and update the Zoning Code to reflect community needs.

Action 3-3: Encourage the use of cluster development in the Rio Grande Valley that concentrates buildings on a portion of the site or subdivision to allow the remaining land to be used for agriculture.

Goal 4: Coordinate land use and infrastructure decisions and ensure that Valencia County residents have convenient access to goods and services.

Action 4-1: Promote master-planned development of housing in the County with adequate infrastructure.

Action 4-2: Provide infrastructure connections to Priority Growth Areas to encourage growth and efficient expansion of services.

Action 4-3: Encourage development and redevelopment that brings goods, services, and amenities in close proximity to established concentrations of housing to promote convenient access for all residents.

Goal 5: Update the Zoning Code to allow more flexibility in land use.

Action 5-1: Amend the Zoning Code to ensure zone districts provide an adequate range of development characteristics, add a mixed-use zoning district, and provide for higher density housing development within Priority Growth Areas.

Action 5-2: Create a fast-track approval process for mixed-use and other zone districts to allow for higher intensity and more flexible development.

Housing

A diverse array of desirable and affordable housing options provides the opportunity to accommodate growth in an organized and attractive way and meet the needs of changing demographics. With the development pressures associated with increased economic activity and large employers moving into both the County and to the north in the Albuquerque metropolitan area, ensuring an adequate housing supply is an important factor for managing growth and maintaining housing affordability and a high quality of life across Valencia County.

Housing Character/Supply

Housing Distribution

Due to the rural nature of Valencia County, the most common housing type is single-family housing on large lots. Approximately 3% of the land area, or approximately 21,600 acres within Valencia County, is currently used for residential housing. Of that land area, more than 99% is dedicated to single-family housing, with multi-family housing comprising only about 90 acres of total land area. Refer to the Land Use Chapter for distribution of single-family and multi-family housing land uses.

The most densely populated centers are found in the incorporated portions of the County. Within the unincorporated communities located along the Rio Grande, housing supply is often older and located on larger lots surrounded by agricultural fields. Communities in higher elevations on former rangeland to the east and west of the Rio Grande Valley, including Meadow Lake, Highland Meadows, and El Cerro-Monterey Park, feature larger lots on a more regular street grid with more recently constructed homes and a multitude of mobile homes. Pockets of single-developer single-family residential neighborhoods are located mostly just beyond the Rio Grande Valley where agricultural fields meet the dry rangeland of the mesas.

Housing Supply and Mix

The overwhelming majority of housing units within the County are single-family at 95.5%. Of the single housing stock, nearly one-third are mobile homes or trailers. This housing type comprises a significantly higher share of housing than Bernalillo County or New Mexico overall. Since land prices are relatively inexpensive in most of Valencia County, mobile homes provide landowners a less expensive and quicker way to live on their land. However, having such a large stock of mobile homes has some safety implications. The US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) enacted design and construction safety standards in 1976 for mobile homes. Much of the housing stock of mobile homes built prior to 1976 are in substandard condition and may be deteriorating and in need of safety upgrades or total demolition.

Multi-family housing types ranging from duplexes, townhouses, and apartment units comprise the remaining 6.2% of the housing stock. By comparison, the total housing unit mix in Bernalillo County is 70.5% single-family and 29.5% multi-family units. Compared to the state overall, Valencia County has over 10 percentage points more single-family units.

Table 16: Housing Stock by Unit Type

Housing Unit Type	Valencia County		Bernalillo County		New Mexico*	
	Unit Count	Percent	Unit Count	Percent	Unit Count	Percent
Single-family	29,244	93.8	204,941	70.5	762,173	81.3
<i>Detached Home</i>	19,834	63.6	190,362	64.8	601,870	64.2
<i>Mobile Home</i>	9,410	30.2	14,579	5.7	31,942	17.1
Multi-family / Other	1,964	6.2	86,630	29.5	175,747	18.7
Total	31,208	100.0	293,787	100.0	937,920	100.0

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey.

Note: Valencia County and Bernalillo County estimates are for the year 2016 and were developed for the Connections 2040 MTP. State-level data is taken from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey. Multi-family includes attached single-family units.

Of the available multi-family housing, the majority are small complexes comprised of two, three, or four units. These multi-family housing types are more consistent with the character of Valencia County but limit the supply of housing for individuals seeking more affordable options or an alternative to single-family residential. Table 17 below provides estimates from the US Census Bureau on the types of multi-family housing units in Valencia County.

Table 17: Multi-Family Unit Type, Valencia County

Unit Type	Unit Count	Percent of Multi-Family Stock
2 units	878	45.4%
3 or 4 units	395	20.4%
5 to 9 units	268	13.9%
10 to 19 units	109	5.6%
20 or more units	283	14.6%

Note: Based on data from US Census Bureau 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates; Two-unit type includes single-family attached

Age of Housing Stock

Over 80% of the County’s housing stock has been constructed since the 1970s and almost 44% of the housing stock has been constructed since the 1990s. By contrast, 71% of the statewide housing stock has been constructed since the 1970s and 36% has been constructed since the 1990s (see Table 18).

The age and condition of existing housing units is an important factor in determining whether the existing units can continue to provide high-quality housing for the future. Despite the fact that the majority of the overall housing stock across the County was constructed relatively recently, much of the housing in unincorporated areas is older. As such, the County may consider rehabilitation programs that provide funding to help maintain and/or renovate housing in older communities and neighborhoods.

Table 18: Age of Housing Stock

Year Housing Unit Built	Valencia County		New Mexico	
	Unit Count	Percent	Unit Count	Percent
2010 or later	713	2.3%	41,259	4.4%
Built 2000 To 2009	5,301	17.0%	143,253	15.3%
Built 1990 To 1999	8,053	25.8%	165,460	17.6%
Built 1980 To 1989	5,893	18.9%	160,467	17.1%
Built 1970 To 1979	5,961	19.1%	164,321	17.5%
Built 1960 To 1969	2,294	7.4%	93,740	10.0%
Built 1950 To 1959	1,381	4.4%	89,627	9.6%
Before 1950	1,612	5.2%	79,793	8.5%

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates

Housing Affordability

The small percentage of multi-family housing or duplexes (6.2% of total housing) is a factor that impacts the affordability of housing within the County. Offering a greater mix of housing types, notably multi-family units, senior housing, and accessory dwelling units, allows for occupants of varying socioeconomic backgrounds to live comfortably without being cost burdened. Across Valencia County, 79% of occupied housing units are owner-occupied while 21% are renter-occupied. Relatively low household income levels indicate there is a housing affordability issue within the County. The combination of modest multi-family housing stock and high rates of poverty indicate that demand for these types of housing likely exceeds supply.

In 2015, Valencia County and the Village of Los Lunas completed a *Joint Affordable Housing Plan* to enable the jurisdictions to adopt affordable housing ordinances and mobilize public resources that support the provision of affordable housing. The Plan includes a community and housing profile, housing needs assessment, land use analysis, and goals, policies, and objectives. The housing needs assessment identified a maximum of 2,971 affordable rental needs within the five-year period (2015-2020), with 60% of the rental inventory in need of rehabilitation. Goals outlined in the *Joint Affordable Housing Plan* include:

- Fostering affordable housing production for households earning at or below 80% of the Valencia County adjusted median income (AMI).
- Rehabilitation of substandard single family and multi-family dwelling units for households earning at or below 80% of the Valencia County adjusted AMI.
- Production of affordable rental units for households earning at or below 60% of the Valencia County adjusted AMI.
- Increasing the volume of supportive housing available for seniors, veterans, and/or disabled households
- Supporting affordable housing through the provision of regulatory concessions and incentives for new development.

CHALLENGES

Demand Pressures and Managing Anticipated Growth

The inherent attractiveness of Valencia County as a place to live, plus the ongoing economic development taking place around Los Lunas and the greater Albuquerque region, will create pressure for new housing developments. Land for new housing is most readily available on the mesas east and west of the Rio Grande, but is less desirable than the Rio Grande Valley, or “greenbelt.” The greenbelt offers proximity to services, as well as more established vegetation that often attracts residents who desire the fertile land for small-scale farming and gardening. Public feedback revealed that many residents value preserving the greenbelt, particularly from single-family subdivision development. Redirecting residential growth to areas deemed appropriate by the community such as Priority Growth Areas, would reduce the development pressures on this valued asset.

The most recent projections from MRCOG indicate more than 3,700 additional housing units will be built by 2040. Assuming current land use practices continue, the vast majority of this new housing is expected to be single-family units. However, there is an opportunity to meet some of this demand through alternative housing types, including accessory dwelling units and multi-family housing in strategic areas. Such alternative housing options can consume less land than large lot single-family housing, and some of this new growth, particularly higher density multi-family units, can be directed to Priority Growth Areas with increased access to services.

Table 19: Current (2016) and Projected (2040) Housing Supply in Valencia County, Connections 2040 MTP

Housing Unit Type	2016	2040	Net Change	2040 Share of Housing by Type
Single-family	29,360	32,916	+3,556	95.5%
Multi-family	1,385	1,560	+175	4.5%
Total	30,745	34,476	3,731	100%

Note: These numbers were developed by MRCOG and differ slightly from the 2015-2019 American Community Survey data. Projected housing values should be used in combination with the 2016 base year data from MRCOG.

Challenges to Providing Supply

Providing additional housing supply will ensure that Valencia County remains affordable for existing residents and accommodates additional residents. Given the changing demographics of the County and the increase in the number of senior citizens in particular, ensuring an adequate housing supply means a greater range of housing options than those that currently exist. However, current regulations limit the types of housing options that may be constructed.

One major regulatory challenge includes limitations to non-single-family housing within the Valencia County Zoning Code. The provisions of the current Zoning Code do not easily provide for alternative housing including multi-family housing. The code requires a minimum lot size of 1.5 acres for duplex and multiplex development. This minimum lot size is excessive compared to national best practices, particularly for duplex housing types, which are commonly located on smaller lots as infill development. Decreasing the minimum lot size requirements for both duplex and multi-family development while increasing the dwelling units per acre for single and multi-family housing in places deemed appropriate, particularly in Priority Growth Areas, would allow a larger variety of housing types.

Senior housing was indicated as one of the highest needs within the County according to the community survey. Since senior housing is considered multi-family housing in some instances, it is also limited in its development because of the development standards within the Zoning Code. The recommended changes outlined above would therefore also increase the County’s ability to accommodate more senior housing.

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Existing regulations also create hurdles for the creation of Accessory Dwelling Units (ADUs) that could create alternative housing options for multi-generational families. The current provisions of the zoning code allow the addition of accessory dwelling unit if they are directly connected to the primary structure and do not contain a secondary kitchen. Revisions to the zoning that allowed detached dwelling units with secondary kitchens would create additional affordable housing options that could serve multiple purpose such as assisting aging parents who struggle to afford housing, providing economic security for property owners through additional rental income and provide smaller housing options for those looking to rent.

Maintenance of Existing Housing Stock

Abandoned houses pose a significant aesthetic issue for neighboring residents as well as attract crime. Valencia County has experienced a surge of abandoned problem properties in recent years, but the County does not have a regular budget for demolition of abandoned properties. In 2021, the County received \$500,000 in capital appropriation funding from the state legislature to help with noticing and subsequent demolition of abandoned properties. These funds will likely go towards demolition of fifteen to thirty properties after proper noticing and warning is sent. This program is ultimately deigned to address the appearance and perception of existing housing stock within Valencia County.

Many of these abandoned problem properties are mobile homes. As these structures become less habitable, owners are more likely to abandon these properties rather than pay for demolition costs. Continuing demolition of abandoned properties should remain a priority for the County and funds should be routinely set aside. County staff have also observed the growing presence of residents living in recreational vehicles for extended periods of time. This poses many concerns including safety, access to hook-ups, and waste management.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES AND FUTURE NEEDS

Public Input

There are a number of strategies that may be applied to alleviate the challenges to housing supply and the potential for unwelcome forms of growth. Recommendations include promoting a wider variety of housing types by creating greater flexibility in housing types and by directing growth to Priority Growth Areas in order to preserve agricultural lands and protect the rural nature of the existing housing.

The community survey conducted as part of this Comprehensive Plan included a question on types of additional housing needed in Valencia County. Almost half of respondents indicated 'Affordable Housing' as a needed type of additional housing, followed by 'Single-family Residential - Rural Large Lot' and 'Single-family Residential - Suburban Small Lot'. Respondents were allowed to choose their top three answers. Results for this question are indicated in the Table 5 below.

Table 5: Community Survey Response to Types of Additional Housing Needed

Answer Choices	Share of Responses
Affordable Housing	46.0%
Single-family Residential – Rural Large Lot	39.3%
Single-family Residential – Suburban Small Lot	35.1%
Senior Housing/ Assisted Living Facilities	27.3%
Multi-family Residential (i.e. Apartments)	21.8%
Mixed-use – Commercial and Residential	20.0%
Secondary Dwelling Units (e.g. Casitas, Tiny Homes, etc.)	18.0%
No additional housing needed	16.2%
Up-scale/ Luxury Housing	8.0%
Other (please specify)	3.6%

Promote Variety of Housing Types

In order to meet a wide range of income and housing needs, a variety of housing types should be promoted and allowed within the Zoning Code, ranging from accessory dwelling units to multi-family units and large lot single-family detached houses. Many communities around the country are experiencing a phenomenon where duplex, multi-plex, and townhome housing units are in short supply and high demand. These housing types, known as the ‘missing middle’ because of their mid-range density, are often not easily accommodated within zoning codes and are therefore not often built. Increasing housing supply, specifically the ‘missing middle’ housing types, is a proven method for promoting overall housing affordability and supporting the needs of households from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Senior housing is also an essential housing type that is needed to promote more affordable housing options and to meet the changing demographic needs of Valencia County. Aging-in-place is often not an option for many senior citizens; therefore, senior housing is needed to allow this population to maintain close connections with their communities. Dedicated senior housing options should be provided within Priority Growth Areas, while ADUs would provide options for multi-generational families to live on one parcel.

Preservation of Existing Housing/Rural Character

The rural character of Valencia County is considered a desirable and attractive trait to both longtime and new residents. In the community survey conducted in Spring 2021, 69% of participants indicated that rural character/small town feel was what they liked most about living in Valencia County. One of the best ways to provide protection for the character of existing housing within rural settings is to designate areas

Connection between Housing Supply and Priority Growth Areas

The Priority Growth Areas reflect locations where additional commercial and residential development could be concentrated.

Residential development in these areas could include a greater variety of housing options and at higher density than rural and agricultural parts of the County.

Higher-density residential development within these areas should be encouraged through a variety of methods, including the creation of mixed-use zoning that allows increased development intensities and policies that make zone changes to appropriate zones within these areas easier.

where increased residential development can be located. Incentives could be applied to Priority Growth Areas to encourage such development in areas deemed appropriate within the County, thereby protecting the stability and character of existing rural areas.

Changes to the Zoning Code as a Strategy for Addressing Housing Priorities

In addition to policies and regulations that promote a variety of housing types, the elimination of existing barriers to providing a variety of housing types within Valencia County is crucial. Currently, very few non-single-family housing options exist. This is due in part to the regulations for multi-family housing within the current County Zoning Code. The Zoning Code lists five residential zone districts: Agricultural Preservation district (AP), Outland district (OD), two Rural Residential districts (RR-1 and RR-2) and the Suburban Residential district (SR). The AP while the two Rural Residential districts and the Suburban Residential district assign a minimum parcel size and dimension as well as a maximum dwelling density for multi-family development that limits larger multi-family projects. In addition, the maximum allowable height is thirty (30) feet for OD, RR-1, and RR-2 and twenty-six (26) feet for SR, which significantly limits the number of stories and the density of multi-family development.

Table 20: Zoning District Dimensional Standards

Zone District	Minimum Parcel Size for Multi-Family	Maximum Dwelling Density	Maximum Allowable Building Height
OD	1.5 acres	1 DU/acre	30 feet
RR-1	1.5 acres	1 DU/acre	30 feet
RR-2	2 acres	0.5 DU/acre	30 feet
SR	3 acres	20 DU/acre	26 feet

Updates to the Zoning Code would allow for the Code to become a tool to use to encourage higher density housing and address housing supply needs. Since the purpose of the RR Districts is to “accommodate rural residential development at an anticipated magnitude or density level that does not require more than a very basic level of services,” the minimum parcel size and maximum dwelling density is recommended to remain unchanged. The SR district is also intended to “accommodate suburban residential development in locations generally adjacent to urban centers and is characterized by patterns of subdivision or partitioning creating a scale of service and access requirements that are complementary or similar to city residential zones.” Reducing the minimum parcel size for multi-family and increasing the maximum allowable height would allow for more multi-family projects in the Suburban Residential at an appropriate scale. Recommended changes include reducing the requirement for a minimum parcel size to 10,000 square feet for multi-family development, increasing the maximum dwelling density to 24 DU/acre, and increasing the maximum allowable height to thirty (30) feet. By reducing the.

Currently, the Planned Development District (PD) allows for mixed use, but development is subject to approval by the County Commission. Creating a mixed-use zone that allows for increased densities greater than the Suburban Residential district within the Priority Growth Areas is recommended. This would help preserve the rural character of the County by directing higher intensity development to designated areas for growth. A mixed-use zone should incentivize development by increasing the allowed densities and development types for alternative housing.

Housing Goals & Action Items

Goal 1: Promote a variety of housing types within the County and ensure the availability of a wide variety of quality housing for all residents.

Action 1-1: Encourage a variety of housing types that maintain the rural character such as single-family, cottage developments, duplexes, and accessory dwelling units outside of Priority Growth Areas.

Action 1-2: Encourage a wider variety of housing types such as townhouses, apartments within Priority Growth Areas that provide opportunities for all economic segments of the population.

Action 1-3: Encourage the development community compounds that support multi-generational housing.

Action 1-4: Encourage and provide for the development of quality senior housing options.

Goal 2: Eliminate barriers to increasing quality housing options within the County.

Action 2-1: Amend the Zoning Code to provide for higher density housing development, particularly within Priority Growth Areas.

Action 2-2: Amend the Zoning Code to encourage housing types that maintain the scale of existing residential areas while expanding housing options.

Goal 3: Allow for development of higher density, multi-unit and mixed-use residential housing within Priority Growth Areas to increase housing availability and affordability.

Action 3-1: Update the Zoning Code to allow higher-density and mixed-use housing options within Priority Growth Areas.

Action 3-2: Incentivize a variety of housing options and affordability levels in Priority Growth Areas.

Action 3-3: Encourage zone changes that facilitate the development of higher-density or mixed-use housing options within Priority Growth Areas.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Economic development is integral to the health and prosperity of Valencia County. A thriving economy improves the overall well-being and desirability of the County and brings in additional resources and revenue that the County can use for repairs, infrastructure improvements, new amenities, and more. This chapter outlines general economic conditions and priorities across Valencia County, including regional trends and opportunities that may impact residents of the unincorporated communities.

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Valencia County Workforce

According to data from the American Community Survey, Valencia County residents are older, maintain lower levels of educational attainment, and have a lower median household income than the overall rates seen in New Mexico.

Workforce Participation

Labor force participation rates and employment data shed light on how economic conditions have changed over time. Per data from the US Census Bureau, the total number of individuals in Valencia County’s labor force remained relatively unchanged, with only a 2% increase in residents ages 16 and over from 2010 to 2019. However, unemployment fell significantly over the course of a decade; the unemployment rate in Valencia County in 2019 was 7.5% compared to over 13% in 2010 (see Table 21). The trend reflects New Mexico’s slow but steady recovery from the Great Recession as well as growth in several key industries in Valencia County (see below).

Table 21: Employment Status, 2010-2019

	2010	2015	2019	% Change 2010-2019
Population 16 years and over	59,231	59,424	60,320	2%
Civilian Labor Force	31,689	32,064	32,080	1%
Employed	27,483	28,088	29,682	8%
Unemployed	4,205	3,976	2,398	-43%
Percent Unemployed	13.3%	12.4%	7.5%	-44%

Source: US Census Bureau

Note: It is important to note that different data sources contain slightly different population estimates and workforce numbers. The numbers in this table support the share of the eligible population in the workforce.

Despite the recent economic recovery, due to an aging population, Valencia County must confront the fact that a growing share of potential workers will soon reach retirement age (see the **Community Profile** section for additional discussion). At the same time that many residents will be exiting the workplace, which will create job openings for younger working people, there will likely be an increase in demand for senior services, health care, and home healthcare workforce needs. Meeting these workforce needs may require attracting workers from the greater Albuquerque area and/or concerted efforts to attract younger adults to live and work in Valencia County.

Another workforce dynamic is that large numbers of Valencia County residents commute to Albuquerque and Santa Fe for work. At the same time, many of the low wage jobs in Valencia County are filled by residents of other counties. See the Transportation chapter for additional discussion.

Personal Income and Poverty Levels

Data from the American Community Survey indicates that Valencia County residents have a slightly lower per capita and median household income in comparison to Bernalillo County and the state overall (see Table 22). In contrast, the poverty rate of 17.6% is slightly lower than the state’s overall poverty rate of 18.2%. However, in 2019, the percentage of children living below the poverty level in Valencia County was 22.4%, about 4% higher than the national average.

Table 22: Comparison of Income by Jurisdiction

	Valencia County	Bernalillo County	New Mexico
Per capita income	\$23,675	\$30,734	\$27,230
Median household income	\$48,945	\$53,329	\$49,754
Poverty rate	17.6%	15.5%	18.2%

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey

Employment by Industry

Per data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the primary industries in Valencia County are public administration (which includes public education jobs), healthcare, retail trade, and construction. Agriculture, including farming and support services, is also an important local industry (see Table 23). The industries which grew the most numerically in Valencia County from 2010 to 2019 include construction followed by agriculture and manufacturing. It is important to note that the majority of jobs in Valencia County are located in incorporated areas.

As part of its regional planning efforts, MRCOG also projects employment by industry at the county level. As shown in Table 24, the sectors that are expected to grow the most between 2020 and 2040 in Valencia County include healthcare and accommodation and food services. Other industries that are expected to see significant employment growth include scientific, professional, and technical services and arts and entertainment. Although healthcare and public administration jobs increased between 2010 and 2019, those industries are projected to grow significantly in the coming decades.

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Table 23: Jobs by Industry, 2010-2040

NAICS	Industries	2010	2019	2020*	2030*	2040*
11	Farm/Agriculture	1,305	1,857	1,927	1,941	2,105
21	Mining, Forestry	99	205	205	230	255
22	Utilities	63	60	59	59	58
23	Construction	1,380	2,474	2,453	2,577	2,481
31-33	Manufacturing	735	1,133	1,052	1,097	1,116
42	Wholesale Trade	307	235	224	219	213
44-45	Retail trade	2,881	3,056	3,013	2,902	3,000
48-49	Transportation and Warehousing	1,461	1,755	1,698	1,702	1,779
51	Information	267	210	206	236	268
52	Finance and Insurance	646	609	584	605	595
53	Real Estate	817	793	782	825	815
54	Prof., Scientific, and Tech. Services	707	687	652	780	833
55	Management of Companies	70	109	101	111	116
56	Administration	624	721	686	825	908
61	Education (Private)	212	293	266	318	313
62	Health Care	2,944	2,330	2,286	2,832	3,060
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	358	340	211	353	350
72	Accommodation and Food Services	1,303	1,682	1,389	1,807	1,784
81	Other	1,249	1,304	1,279	1,336	1,269
92	Public Admin. (including Education)	4,588	4,149	4,052	4,304	4,199
	Total Employment	22,016	24,001	23,127	25,058	25,519

Sources: US Bureau of Economic Analysis and Regional Economic Modeling Inc. (REMI), courtesy of MRCOG. Data for 2020, 2030, and 2040 is projected using the REMI model, which is maintained and operated for the region by MRCOG.

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Table 24: Change in Jobs by Industry, 2010-2040

NAICS	Industries	Difference 2010- 2019	Percent Change 2010-2019	Difference 2020- 2040	Percent Change 2020-2040
11	Farm/Agriculture	552	47.4%	178	9.3%
21	Mining, Forestry	106	118.9%	50	24.5%
22	Utilities	-3	-4.3%	-1	-1.1%
23	Construction	1,094	72.6%	29	1.2%
31-33	Manufacturing	398	51.8%	64	6.1%
42	Wholesale Trade	-72	-24.1%	-11	-4.8%
44-45	Retail trade	175	6.0%	-13	-0.4%
48-49	Transportation and Warehousing	294	17.9%	80	4.7%
51	Information	-57	-20.3%	62	30.2%
52	Finance and Insurance	-37	-5.7%	11	1.8%
53	Real Estate	-24	-2.8%	33	4.2%
54	Prof., Scientific, and Tech. Services	-20	-2.7%	182	27.9%
55	Management of Companies	39	45.0%	14	14.1%
56	Administration	97	14.4%	222	32.3%
61	Education (Private)	81	38.1%	47	17.5%
62	Health Care	-614	-18.1%	774	33.9%
71	Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	-18	-4.8%	139	65.8%
72	Accommodation and Food Services	379	28.4%	396	28.5%
81	Other	55	4.1%	-10	-0.8%
92	Public Admin. (including Education)	-439	-9.4%	147	3.6%
	Total Employment	1,985	8.6%	2,392	10.3%

Sources: BEA and Regional Economic Modeling Inc. (REMI), courtesy of MRCOG

Economic Development Plans Initiatives

Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy

The 2020 Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), developed by MRCOG, presents a five-year plan for economic growth and highlights strategies intended to move the central New Mexico region, including Valencia County, towards a more resilient economy. The economic development strategies are grouped into Urban and Rural categories, with unique considerations paid to the character of each setting. The ten focus areas identified in the CEDS can be found in Table 25, many of which are directly applicable to Valencia County.

Table 25: Economic Development Focus Area for Central New Mexico, CEDS

Urban	Rural
Aerospace , including low-Earth orbiting satellite and drone technology manufacturing and testing	Agriculture & Value-Added Food Production using locally or regionally-sourced ingredients
Film / Arts & Entertainment	Energy / Renewable Energy , including solar and wind energy
Information Technology	Entrepreneurship , including business accelerators, incubators, and support for small business
Manufacturing , including advanced manufacturing, assembly and logistics	Health , including research, direct service provision, and health care delivery
Science & Technology , including research and development and advanced technologies	Tourism / Outdoor Recreation

Regional Socioeconomic Forecast

As part of its metropolitan transportation planning mission, MRCOG develops long-range population and employment forecasts by county for the central New Mexico region. The most recent projections – and those cited in this plan – are from the *Connections 2040 MTP*. The MTP utilizes two general forecasts to project what the region will be like 20 years from now called the Trend and the Target scenarios.

The **Trend Scenario** is based upon a continuation of existing land use plans and policies into the future. The scenario features modest levels of growth in Valencia County, with much of the new housing development in the metropolitan area taking place in Rio Rancho and west Albuquerque. The **Target Scenario** represents the regional vision for more resilient land use and development patterns, as adopted by the Metropolitan Transportation Board of MRCOG. This vision is focused on targeted growth in identified activity centers due to the use of economic development incentives and resulting commercial investment.

In both scenarios, employment is projected to increase in Valencia County by 2040, with the Trend Scenario projecting a 19% increase in employment, and the Target Scenario projecting a 24% increase. Table 26 shows the projected employment in Valencia County in 2040 based upon both the Trend and Target scenarios. Population projections are unchanged in each scenario, with about 6.5% of total growth across the County and 3.7% growth projected in unincorporated areas. Employment growth outpaces population due to the low jobs-per-person ratio in the County at present relative to the rest of the metropolitan area and the likely increase in service jobs.

Table 26: Projected Employment Growth by 2040 under MRCOG Scenarios

Year	Employment	% Change from 2016
2016	18,123	-
2040 (Trend)	21,606	19.2%
2040 (Target)	22,522	24.3%

Economic Development Services

The City of Belen, Village of Los Lunas, and the City of Rio Communities each employ dedicated **economic development staff** or consultants. Though the offices are focused primarily on recruitment and business growth within their respective jurisdictions, economic development projects tend to have regional benefits. As such, there are opportunities for Valencia County to partner with local jurisdictions to support business recruitment to both incorporated and unincorporated areas that would provide benefits to residents to all County residents.

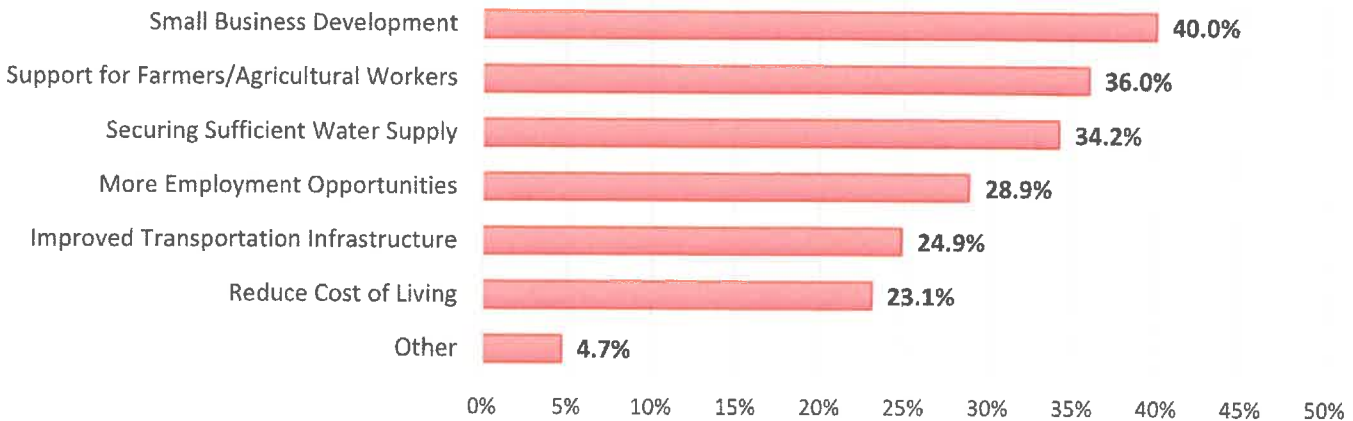
A range of business development offices and incubators also offer a variety of business counseling and training services. These include the Small Business Development Center, located within the new **UNM Westside Workforce Campus** in Los Lunas, and the future Valencia County Business Incubator, which will be located at the Rio Communities City Complex.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Public input and results from the community survey reflect the high value placed by Valencia County residents on maintaining existing community character. Members of the public recognized the benefits of new development and employment opportunities in Los Lunas but were generally wary of intense development taking place across the County. Overall, the Comprehensive Plan outreach process indicated support for the approach that where new economic development occurs, it should be concentrated in places that allow the County to maintain its overall rural and agricultural identify.

The community survey included a question related to economic development priorities for Valencia County (see Figure 12). Though respondents could indicate their top two priorities, no particular issue was cited more than half of the time. The most frequently cited responses include small business development (40% of respondents) and support for famers and agricultural workers (36% of respondents).

Figure 12: Results from Community Survey - Top Two Economic Development Priorities



CRITICAL INDUSTRIES AND LONG-TERM ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The following section details economic opportunities identified during the comprehensive planning process. Since economic development initiatives and benefits are regional in nature, it will be important for Valencia County to work with local municipalities and regional agencies to collectively pursue strategies and business recruitment across jurisdictional boundaries. For example, the housing growth and commercial activity in Los Lunas surrounding Facebook creates employment opportunities and new services for residents across the county. At the same time, there are development opportunities around the Belen Regional Airport and in the northwest portion of the City of Belen.

Facebook Data Center and Growth in Los Lunas

The Village of Los Lunas positions itself as a business friendly community and offers three separate industrial parks that are connected to municipal utility services. The Village has seen significant residential and commercial development in recent years, including 150 new business registrations in the first 10 months of 2021. The most significant investment is from Facebook, which first opened a data center in October 2019 with an initial investment of around \$1 billion. In 2021, the company announced an \$800 million expansion of the facility that will result in a total of eight buildings that support over 400 full-time workers. Facebook claims that it relies on New Mexico-based sub-contractors for over 70% of its contracts, and the jobs and investments associated with the data center directly or indirectly impact residents and businesses across the County. The Village of Los Lunas has reported significant increase in gross receipts tax as a result of permanent jobs and new residents, construction, and complementary businesses that serve and supply the data center.

Location and Proximity to Albuquerque

Valencia County benefits from the access to Albuquerque provided via I-25 and NM 47 and to I-40 via NM 6, which makes the County appealing for businesses to locate. Valencia County is also proximate to Albuquerque, the largest city and the largest supplier of jobs in the state. Since a large share of employed County residents – about 83% - commute to either Bernalillo County or Santa Fe County for work, the fate of the Albuquerque economy affects Valencia County residents. As Albuquerque and Los Lunas continue to grow, a portion of that population will naturally spill over into the various communities of Valencia County. This spillover will lead to additional opportunities for residential and commercial development that could significantly impact the residents and character of Valencia County. Residents and staff routinely expressed concerns regarding the scale of development, and Valencia County will need to take an active role to ensure commercial development occurs in such a way that retains and reflects the unique, rural character of the County. See the Land Use chapter for additional discussion on Priority Growth Areas.

Film Production and Proximity to Mesa del Sol

Film production is an increasingly important part of the economy for the greater Albuquerque area, including Valencia County. Among other sites, County administrative offices were recently used as a set location. Valencia County also benefits from the proximity to film production studios in Albuquerque, including the Mesa del Sol, the master-planned community south of the Sunport. Mesa del Sol is currently home to Netflix's Albuquerque Studios, which announced a major expansion in fall 2020. Additional production announcements in the Albuquerque area have been made by Sony Pictures, Warner Brothers, and NBC Universal.

Improved Transportation Infrastructure and New River Crossing

Mobility across the County will be enhanced through the proposed interchange and river crossing along Morris Rd. The project will likely create economic development opportunities in unincorporated areas through improved land access and is projected to alleviate congestion along NM 6 and improve access for County residents to employment sites. To support potential development along the corridor, Morris Rd is proposed as a Priority Growth Area. See the Land Use and Transportation chapters for additional discussion.

Economic Diversification and Resiliency

The Comprehensive Plan was developed during the pandemic in a time of economic uncertainty. It will be critical for Valencia County to participate in regional and statewide efforts to consider ways to enhance economic resiliency. Among the opportunities may include promoting Valencia County as a location for remote working.

Regional Medical Facility

Valencia County has long sought a regional medical facility, which is critical from the standpoint of community services and quality of life. Such a facility would instantly become a major source of employment and activity in the region. Previous proposals have called for a hospital as large as 100,000 square-feet or more with up to 500 jobs.

Tourism

During the public outreach process, one resident described Valencia County as the “hidden gem of the Rio Grande Valley.” As the Valencia County grows and more visitors are attracted to the area, tourism may begin to increase and the status of “hidden gem” may no longer apply. According to the New Mexico Tourism Department, visitations to New Mexico are increasing, with 38 million visitors in 2019 compared to 34 million in 2015. The Tourism Department indicates that visitors spent \$6.3 billion in 2019 and helped sustain 72,500 jobs. Valencia County can capitalize on these trends by increasing the promotion and marketing of tourist attractions and supporting jobs in the tourism sector.

Rail Freight

For over 100 years, the **BNSF Railyard** has operated in the middle of Belen. The rail yard is a major employer and is uniquely situated for additional industrial development due to the ease of connections to both rail and highway-based freight services. Additional rail and transportation-related opportunities are associated with the **Central New Mexico Rail Park** in western Los Lunas. The site is also served by BNSF and features more than 1,400 acres of land designated and marketed for industrial activity with utilities. Among the advantages promoted by the Rail Park is access from NM 6 to I-40 and I-25. The Rio Grande Industrial Park in the City of Belen offers rail freight access and has the benefit of being located in a designated Opportunity Zone.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND ACTION ITEMS

Goal 1: Participate in regional economic development initiatives.

Action 1-1: Partner with MRCOG and state agencies on regional planning efforts and studies that affect the central New Mexico region.

Action 1-2: Coordinate with the City of Belen, City of Rio Communities, and Village of Los Lunas on economic development initiatives, including recruiting, marketing, and infrastructure provision.

Goal 2: Provide support for small businesses and entrepreneurship.

Action 2-1: Continue to partner with UNM Valencia, the UNM Westside Workforce Campus, the Small Business Development Center, and the future Valencia County Business Incubator on workforce training initiatives.

Action 2-2: Expand access to high-speed internet and support investments in broadband infrastructure.

Goal 3: Support the expansion of healthcare service in Valencia County.

Action 3-1: Continue to advocate for the development of a Valencia County Regional Medical Facility.

Action 3-2: Develop partnerships with local healthcare providers to train and recruit healthcare professionals, including home healthcare workers.

Goal 4: Encourage new business development in Priority Growth Areas.

Action 4-1: Update the zoning code to create more flexibility in development in Priority Growth Areas, including allowing for mixed-use zoning districts.

Action 4-2: Proactively invest in transportation and utilities infrastructure in Priority Growth Areas to encourage business investment.

TRANSPORTATION

EXISTING CONDITIONS

Regional Context

Transportation patterns are shaped by the major infrastructure that traverses the County and the proximity to the City of Albuquerque. Regional transportation infrastructure provided within Valencia County includes roads, freight railroads, bus and rail transit, and airports. Valencia County is bisected by I-25, ensuring that much of the vehicle travel is regional in nature; other major roadways are also owned and operated by NMDOT. This chapter examines current transportation patterns, documents existing and proposed infrastructure, and provides general recommendations and priorities for future improvements.

Regional Planning Efforts

Due to its close proximity to the City of Albuquerque, Valencia County is included by the US Census Bureau as part of the Albuquerque Metropolitan Planning Area and is a member organization of MRCOG and the Mid-Region Metropolitan Planning Organization (MRMPO). These governmental agencies provide regional planning services throughout the central New Mexico region. Specifically, MRMPO works with various entities and the public in central New Mexico to facilitate the development of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), a long-range transportation plan which helps guide transportation investment in the region.

The most recent version of the metropolitan transportation plan – the *Connections 2040 MTP* – was adopted in 2020. As part of the regional planning process, the MTP develops population and employment projections and analyzes the potential impact of that growth on the regional transportation system. These projections, which are included in the Valencia County Comprehensive Plan, are used to understand likely impacts to regional roads and to proactively prepare for future transportation demands and infrastructure improvements. Among the general priorities for the MTP include increased transportation options for individuals who may not have access to or choose to travel by private vehicle. Valencia County is eligible to receive federal transportation dollars through programs administered by MRMPO and is more likely to receive federal funds for projects that support regional goals and priorities.

The most significant transportation investment in Valencia County is an additional river crossing south of NM 6 in the Village of Los Lunas. Per the MTP, the river crossing will “increase response times for emergency services and improve congestion and commute times for the growing number of residents in Valencia County.”

Commuting and Travel Patterns

Valencia County currently maintains a jobs-housing imbalance (i.e. more housing than jobs), which leads to many people leaving the County for work, services, and amenities. As a result of this imbalance, Valencia County residents’ commutes to work are significantly longer compared to the state overall and to residents of Bernalillo County. According to 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, only 46% of employed Valencia County residents have a commute of less than 30 minutes, compared to about 70% of Bernalillo County residents, while nearly a quarter of Valencia County residents (23.1%) have a commute of over one hour. By contrast, only 4% of Bernalillo County residents have such a lengthy commute. Almost 40% of Valencia County residents’ commute times are 30-59 minutes compared to 22% at the state level; the average commute time for all workers is 28.4 minutes compared to 22.3 minutes across the state.

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Table 27: Travel Time to Work

Travel Time	Bernalillo	Valencia	New Mexico
Under 15 Minutes	23.6%	18.5%	19.1%
15 to 29 Minutes	46.0%	27.3%	27.2%
30 to 59 Minutes	21.5%	27.7%	28.5%
Over 1 Hour	4.2%	23.1%	22.2%
Worked at Home	4.7%	3.5%	2.9%

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey

According to 2018 data from the U.S. Census Bureau *On The Map* tool, the majority of employed residents work outside of Valencia County, while about 23% of employed Valencia County residents also work in Valencia County. The data demonstrates the regional nature of commuting in the Valencia County area and a need to support infrastructure connections among communities. Table 28 depicts commuting destinations for the approximately 20,000 employed residents that work outside Valencia County. Residents who work outside of Valencia County commute primarily to Bernalillo and Santa Fe Counties for work. These commuting patterns emphasize the importance of maintaining the regional roadway network in good condition and providing public transit options such as the Rail Runner that link Valencia County communities with the Cities of Albuquerque and Santa Fe.

Figure 13: Inflow and Outflow of Employed Valencia County Residents, On The Map (2018)

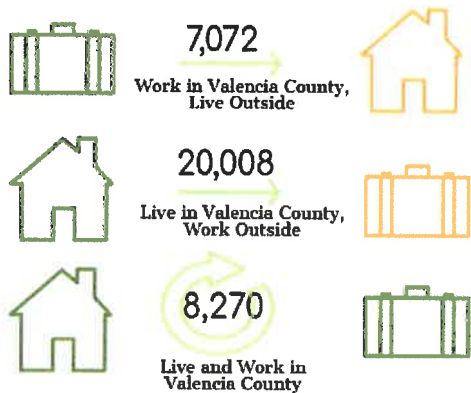


Table 28: Work Commute Destinations by Employed County Residents, On the Map - 2018

County of Work	Employed Valencia County Residents	Percent
Bernalillo	15,408	77%
Santa Fe	1,187	6%
Cibola	291	1%
Socorro	181	1%
Other	2,941	15%
Total	20,008	100%

Mid-Region Travel Survey

The longer distances to reach jobs, services, and amenities faced by Valencia County residents is also reflected by a survey performed by MRCOG in 2013 and 2014 which tracked participants travel patterns. According to the survey, which included 349 households from Valencia County, Valencia County residents traveled an average of 40.4 miles per day, which is almost 80% more than Bernalillo County residents. Valencia County residents also traveled significantly longer distances to reach both work and retail or shopping destinations compared to Bernalillo County residents.

Table 29: Key Findings by County from Mid-Region Household Travel Survey, 2014

	Bernalillo County	Valencia County
Trips per day	3.81	3.55
Total Distance Traveled per Day	22.8 miles	40.4 miles
Average Commuting Trip	16.7 miles	7.9 miles
Average Retail/Shopping Trip	3.7 miles	6.3 miles
Share of Daily Trips by Bike	2.0%	0.1%
Share of Daily Trips by Walking	8.3%	3.9%
Share of Daily Trips by Transit	2.7%	1.7%

Vehicle Ownership and Means of Transportation to Work

Given the rural character of Valencia County, access to a vehicle is important for residents to travel to services and places of employment. About 3.5% of Valencia County households have no access to a vehicle compared to 5.7% of New Mexican Households. Valencia County residents are also slightly more likely to drive alone to work (83.4%) than State residents (80.4%). An additional 8.7% of Valencia County residents carpool to work.

Table 30: Housing Units by Vehicles Available

Vehicles Available	New Mexico	Valencia County
No Vehicle Available	5.7%	3.5%
1 Vehicle Available	33.0%	26.5%
2 Vehicles Available	36.7%	37.4%
3 Vehicles Available	16.4%	21.0%
4 or More Vehicles Available	8.3%	11.7%

Source: 2015-2019 American Community Survey

Table 31: Means of Transportation to Work

Transportation Mode	Valencia County	Bernalillo County	New Mexico
Drove Alone	83.4%	80.8%	80.4%
Carpooled	8.7%	9.1%	10.0%
Public Transportation	1.0%	1.7%	1.1%
Walked	0.8%	1.8%	2.0%
Other Means	1.8%	2.0%	1.7%
Worked at Home	4.3%	4.7%	4.9%

TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

Roadway Network

County Roadway System

Valencia County currently owns and maintains a network of about 466.4 miles of roads. The largest share of County-owned facilities are dirt roads (218.8 miles or 47% of the system). Roads paved with asphalt comprise about 40% of the system, or 185.6 miles, while smaller shares of roads are chip seal or gravel (see Table 32). More than 160 miles of roadways within Valencia County are owned and maintained by NMDOT, including I-25 and various NM and US highways.

Table 32: Valencia County Roads by Type

Roadway Type	Miles	Share
Asphalt	185.8	39.8%
Chip Seal	11.1	2.4%
Gravel	50.8	10.9%
Dirt	218.8	46.9%
Total	466.4	100%

Major Roadway Connections

Regional connections are especially important given that most employed Valencia County residents travel outside of the County for work, healthcare services, and other retail and service needs. Regional connections across Valencia County are provided by a series of state-owned roadways. Major access to the Albuquerque metropolitan area is provided by I-25 and NM 47, while NM 314 also provides access to Isleta Pueblo. NM 116 is a north-south route that runs parallel to I-25 and provides access to communities south of Belen, including Jarales. See Figure 14 for major roads across Valencia County by functional classification.

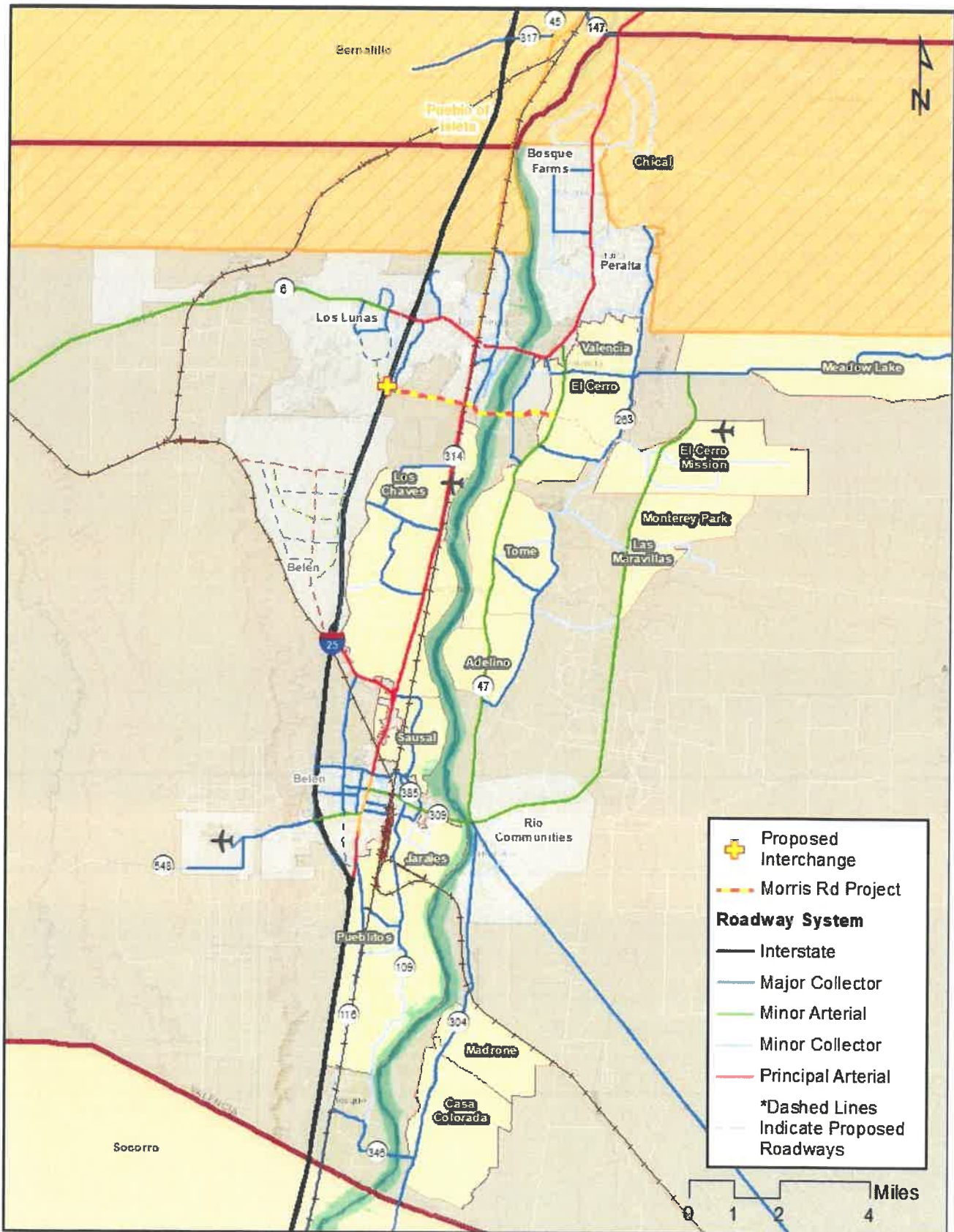
Valencia County Road Network

The following County-owned roads provide key access to and within unincorporated communities.

- **Manzano Expressway** is a north-south minor arterial that traverses the eastern portion of the valley and connects between NM 47 and Meadowlake Rd. Manzano Expressway provides access to the communities of Las Maravillas, El Cerro-Monterey Park, and Meadowlake.
- **El Cerro Mission Blvd** is a minor collector that provides east-west connections from the El Cerro community to Manzano Expressway and other north-south routes.
- **Meadowlake Rd** is a major collector that provides east-west connections to Manzano Express, La Ladera, and other north-south routes.
- **Morris Rd** is an east-west facility in southern Los Lunas that is slated to be extended as part of a new river crossing between NM 47 and I-25.
- **Del Oro Loop** is an east-west minor collector that links NM 47 with Las Maravillas and other communities in eastern Valencia County.
- **La Entrada Rd** is a north-south major collector that runs parallel to NM 47 south of Rio del Oro Loop and provides access to UNM-Valencia and the communities of Adelino and Tomé.

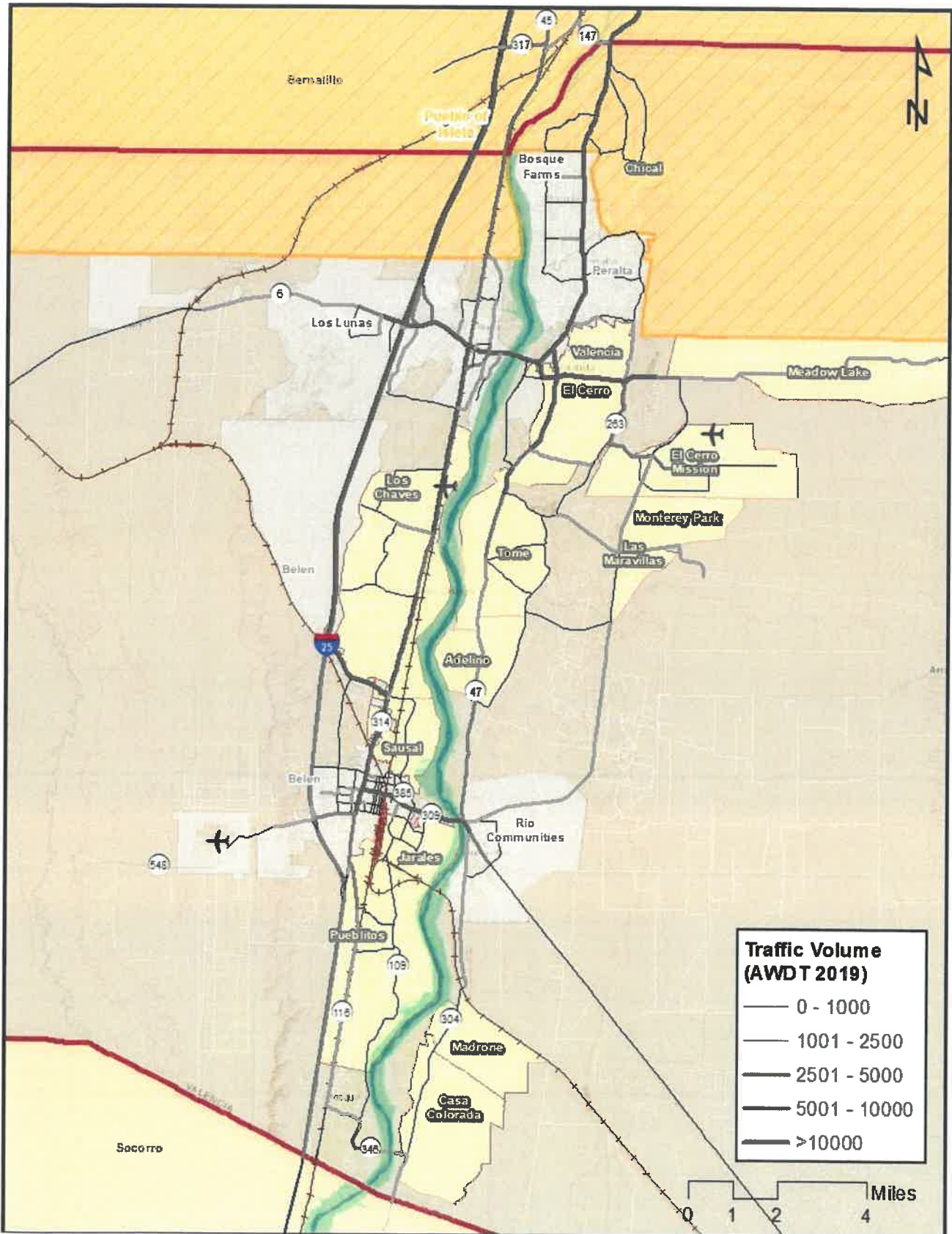
VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Figure 14: Major Roadways and Functional Classifications across Valencia County



VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Figure 15: Traffic Volumes for Valencia County Roads (2019)



Roadway Maintenance

The Road Maintenance Department of Valencia County oversees road and sign maintenance, pothole and road surface repair, weed management, culvert replacement, and guardrail installation on all roads owned and maintained by the County. Due to limited funding, roadway maintenance in the unincorporated portions of Valencia County is generally completed on a response-to-complaints basis. The County currently has a fleet of road graders and dump trucks assigned to road maintenance. Local roads located in the incorporated portions of the County are maintained by their respective municipal road departments.

Planned Roadway Improvements

I-25 Interchange/ Morris Rd Extension

An additional river crossing in Valencia County has been in discussion for decades and was formally identified in the *Valencia County Mobility Plan* in 2006. The soon to be constructed I-25 Interchange / Morris Rd extension projects will add an interchange at I-25 approximately 1.5 miles south of NM 6. In addition, the project will create about four miles of four-lane roadway along Morris Road, ultimately connecting I-25 with NM 47 via a new river crossing. The total project cost is expected to be \$115-120 million, including about \$25 million for the new interchange. Construction is set to begin in FY 2022, with Phase 1 of construction taking place from NM 47 to NM 314 and Phase 2 going from NM 314 to I-25.

As of this writing, funding for the project is still being assembled. Major funding sources include more than \$25 million in state capital outlay, \$45 million in discretionary funds from NMDOT, and a recent \$25 million grant from USDOT through the INFRA program. Additional funding from local agencies includes \$2 million in GO bonds from Valencia County and \$2.5 million in GO bonds from the Village of Los Lunas. Valencia County also contributed to the costs of engineering feasibility and design studies.

Though the majority of the project is located in the Village of Los Lunas, the project will provide significant benefit to residents of unincorporated Valencia County. Expected benefits of the project include greater access for residents on the east mesa area to Los Lunas, relieving congestion on NM 6, and the potential for additional development along Morris Rd, in Huning Ranch, and along the west side of I-25 in Los Lunas.

Other Roadway Projects and Needs

Valencia County is pursuing a series of roadway improvement projects to ensure that regional facilities are in good condition. Among the general needs across Valencia County include roadway rehabilitation, improved drainage facilities, and street lighting in more developed residential and commercial areas. Major priorities for improvement include El Cerro Mission Rd and Meadowlake Rd. Both roadways are in need of resurfacing, drainage improvements, lighting, and multi-modal infrastructure, including sidewalks, shoulders, and/or multi-use trails.

Other desired improvements in the near-term include:

- **NM 263 and Sandhill Rd intersection** improvements, including street lighting near Valencia High School
- **James St Bridge** replacement and drainage improvements to address flooding from the arroyo
- **Manzano Expressway** between Meadowlake Rd and El Cerro Mission Blvd
- **North Miller Rd** rehabilitation and drainage improvements from Peyton Rd south to the end of the roadway
- **NM 47 and NM 263 intersection** improvements, including traffic light upgrade and street lighting
- **La Ladera Rd (NM 263)** rehabilitation; funding provided by NMDOT
- **Calle de Llano** drainage improvements (Highland Meadows area)

Pedestrian Facilities

Pedestrian facilities currently exist in parts of the incorporated municipalities of Valencia County; however, County roads generally lack sidewalks or multi-use trail facilities. Sidewalks are appropriate for new subdivisions while multi-use trails are desirable along major County roads where right-of-way is available. Alternative options for pedestrians may be considered in rural areas where curb and gutter are not appropriate and traffic volumes are low. Specifically, many paved local roads may fit the criteria for pedestrian lanes, which typically feature 4 to 6 foot striped areas on the edge of the paved road area. According to the FHWA guide *Small Town and Rural Multimodal Networks*, pedestrian lanes are on-street walking routes along paved routes with little traffic (i.e., below 500 vehicles per day) and speeds of 30 MPH or less. Dirt trails may be considered along more rural roads where ADA standards do not need to be met.

Bikeways and Trails

Bikeways and trails are an increasingly important part of providing a high quality of life for residents, improving public health outcomes, and providing access for residents to job sites and services. Opportunities to bike on formal facilities are limited; however, a number of trails and routes have been identified in previous planning efforts. Current facilities include the Las Maravillas Trail and various identified bike routes along rural roads with moderate traffic levels, including La Entrada Rd, Jaramillo Rd, and Gabaldon Rd. Though these roadways are considered bike routes, there are no formal facilities and minimal signage.



Long Range Bikeway System

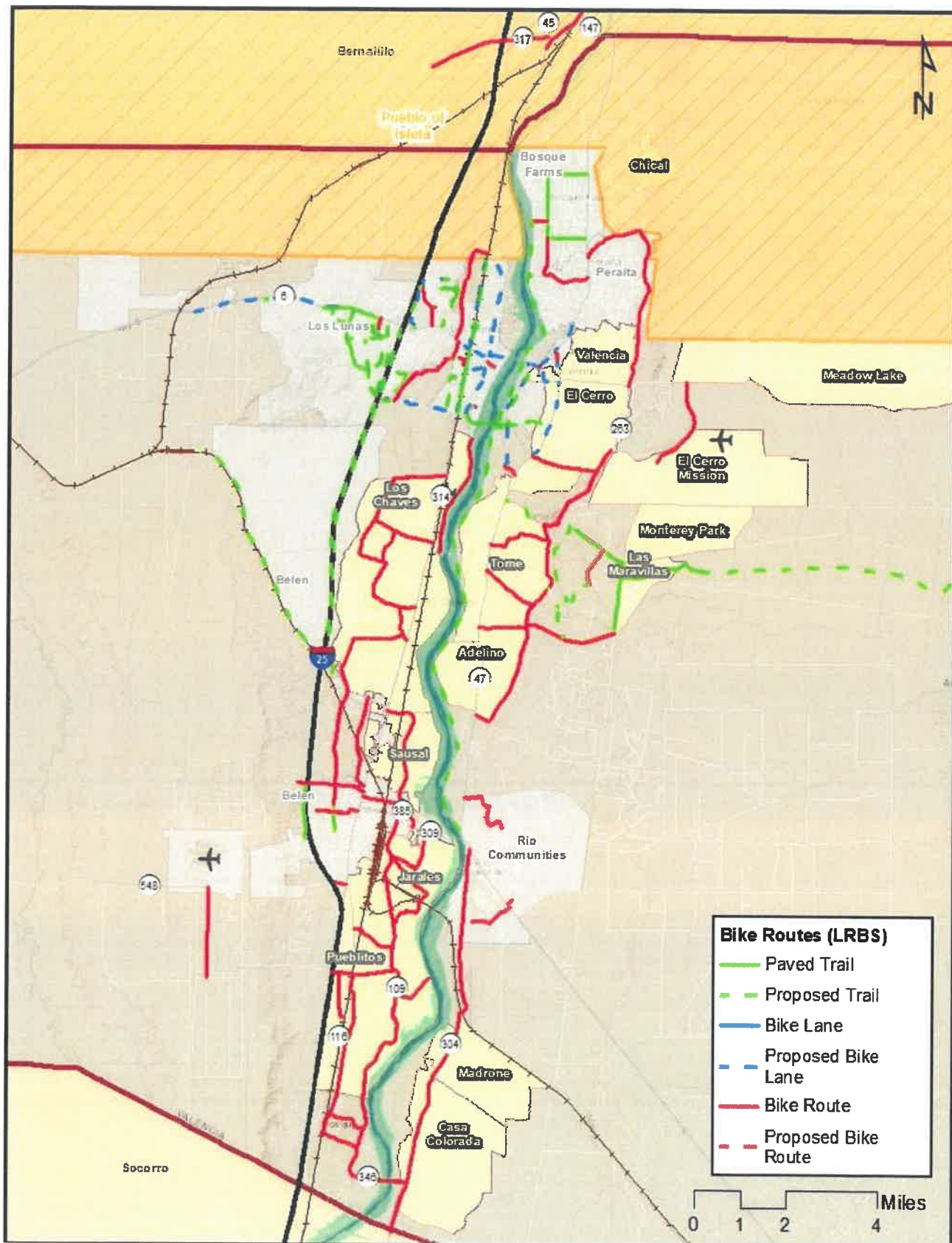
Proposed bike routes across the region are identified in the Long Range Bikeway System (LRBS), maintained by MRCOG. Potential on-street bike facilities in unincorporated areas of Valencia County include Manzano Expressway, Meadowlake Rd, and El Cerro Mission Blvd. See Figure 16 for a map of existing and proposed bikeways and trails and Table 33 for a list and description of proposed multi-use trails across unincorporated Valencia County.

Table 33: Proposed Trails in Unincorporated Valencia County in the Long Range Bikeway System (MRCOG)

Route / Facility Type	Length	Location / Connections
Rio del Oro Trail	10 miles	Proposed route connects portions of the east mesa including the UNM-Valencia campus, Tomé Elementary School, and Manzano Vistas
Rio Communities Core Link – Multi-use Trail	6 miles	Linkage to the Rio del Oro Trail; would connect the Manzano Expressway with NM 47 and parts of Rio Communities
Greenways Trail	15 miles	North-south route along river; would intersect with the Rio Del Oro Trail

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Figure 16: Existing and Proposed Bikeway Facilities



NM Bike Plan

Multiple NM and US highways in Valencia County are identified as Tier 1 and Tier 2 facilities in the NMDOT *Prioritized Statewide Bicycle Network Plan* (NM Bike Plan). These tier designations reflect the level of benefits from bikeways and the type of desired infrastructure rather than priority for implementation. When reconstruction or major rehabilitation takes place on the roadways, the NM Bike Plan recommends at least 5-foot bike lanes on Tier 1 and Tier 2 facilities within municipal limits and 5-foot shoulders in unincorporated areas. Buffers are desirable on higher speed and volume roadways.

Table 34: Bikeway Priority Tiers on NMDOT Facilities

Roadway Name	NM Bike Plan Tier
NM 6	Tier 1
NM 309	Tier 1
NM 314	Tier 1
NM 116	Tier 2
NM 263 (La Ladera Rd)	Tier 2
NM 304	Tier 2
NM 47	Tier 2

Los Lunas Bicycle Master Plan

The Village of Los Lunas Bicycle Master Plan, adopted in 2017, is an effort to improve the health and safety of residents, reduce vehicle miles traveled, and provide recreational opportunities. The Village of Los Lunas currently utilizes three main types of bicycle facilities: multi-purpose paths, bike lanes, and shared use roadways. Proposed facilities that traverse the Village of Los Lunas include bike lanes along NM 6 and multi-use trails along Morris Rd, Los Lentos Rd, and NM 314 (which would expand upon the existing trail to the north of the Rail Runner station).

Public Transit

Fixed Route

The Rio Metro Regional Transit District (Rio Metro) operates fixed route public transit service from the communities of Belen, Los Lunas, Peralta, and Bosque Farms and offers regular connections to the Belen and Los Lunas Rail Runner stations. Rio Metro also provides transit connections between Belen and Downtown Albuquerque. Table 35 details the service characteristics of Rio Metro fixed route services in Valencia County. The information below reflects conditions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rio Metro operates a range of public transit services across Valencia, Sandoval, and Bernalillo Counties. Rio Metro was created to oversee commuter rail operations and provide regional connections that cross jurisdictional boundaries and. These connections benefit local and regional economies by providing increased access to employment and local tourism.

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Table 35: Rio Metro Fixed Routes Serving Valencia County

Route	Route Availability	Notes / Communities Served
206 - Belen	3 weekday morning trips to Belen Rail Runner Station 3 weekday evening trips to Belen Rail Runner Station	Serves neighborhoods along Reinken Ave, Main St, Mesa Rd, and Camino del Llano.
208 - Belen to Albuquerque	3 northbound weekday trips between Belen and Downtown Albuquerque 3 southbound weekday trips between Belen and Downtown Albuquerque	Serves Belen, Los Lunas, Peralta, Bosque Farms and Pueblo of Isleta. Riders are encouraged to use Route 208 in combination with the Rail Runner by taking the bus to Downtown Albuquerque midday and returning by train in the evening.
209 - UNM Valencia Campus	5 daily weekday trips from Los Lunas Transportation Center to UNM Valencia campus	Connects to routes 208, 209, 210, and the Los Lunas Rail Runner station.
210 - Los Lunas to Bosque Farms	All day weekday service along NM 6 and NM 47 between Los Lunas, Peralta, and Bosque Farms; frequency is one bus every 45 minutes	Deviated fixed route services that operates on standard schedule but allows passengers can request, by reservation, to be picked up or dropped off within 1/4 mile of a stop. Connects to routes 208, 209, and the Rail Runner.

New Mexico Rail Runner Express

The New Mexico Rail Runner Express is a commuter rail system that provides daily service to 15 stations along the 100-mile Rio Grande corridor between Belen and Santa Fe. The Rail Runner serves Valencia County through stations in Lunas and Belen. The Los Lunas Rail Runner Station is located along NM 314 south of NM 6 and about a half-mile walk from Valencia County administration offices and the judiciary complex. The station is also utilized as a community meeting space and a transit hub for Rio Metro fixed route services. The Belen Rail Runner station is connected to Downtown via a pedestrian overpass that provides access to local businesses.

In addition to supporting commuters from Valencia County who work in Bernalillo and Santa Fe Counties, the Rail Runner provides a key connection for residents to services across the greater Albuquerque metropolitan area and provides options for tourists and visitors to access Valencia County without a private vehicle.



Source: Rio Metro

Dial-a-Ride Service

Rio Metro RTD operates a Dial-a-Ride service to communities in Valencia County as a complement to fixed routes. The Dial-a-Ride service allows travelers to reserve rides at least a day in advance for travel from their home or a predetermined location to their destination of choice within Valencia County.

Valencia County Transit Operations Hub

Rio Metro is currently developing a transit operations center that will oversee operations and dispatch for all transit services operated by the agency in Valencia County. The project is to be completed in two phases, with a headquarters building and parking/staging facility for transit vehicle fleet to be completed as part of initial construction. The site will eventually serve as a maintenance facility and fueling station. The facility will be located east of Lambrose Loop near the junction of NM 6 and NM 47.

Other Transportation Modes

Airports

The **Belen Regional Airport** is the lone public airport that is currently operating in Valencia County. The airport is located on the west mesa of Belen and is accessed via Camino del Llano approximately one mile west of I-25. The airport houses over 50 aircraft, a skydive club, a propeller maintenance facility, aerial photography, and other aviation businesses, as well as an air operation training site for the United States Air Force. The **Mid Valley Air Park** is a privately-operated fly-in facility located east of NM 314 and south of the Village of Los Lunas. National and international travel is available through the Albuquerque Sunport.

Freight Rail

BNSF owns and operates rail corridors that extend from the southeast corner to the northwest corner of the County, passing through both Laguna Pueblo and Navajo Trust Lands. Upon reaching Belen, the railroad tracks split in two, with one track heading north and paralleling the Rio Grande, and the other going northwest and then splitting again south of NM 6. BNSF operates a major rail hub in the City of Belen that employs hundreds.

Commuter rail operates via the Rail Runner from Belen to the North to Santa Fe. See the Public Transit section for additional discussion.

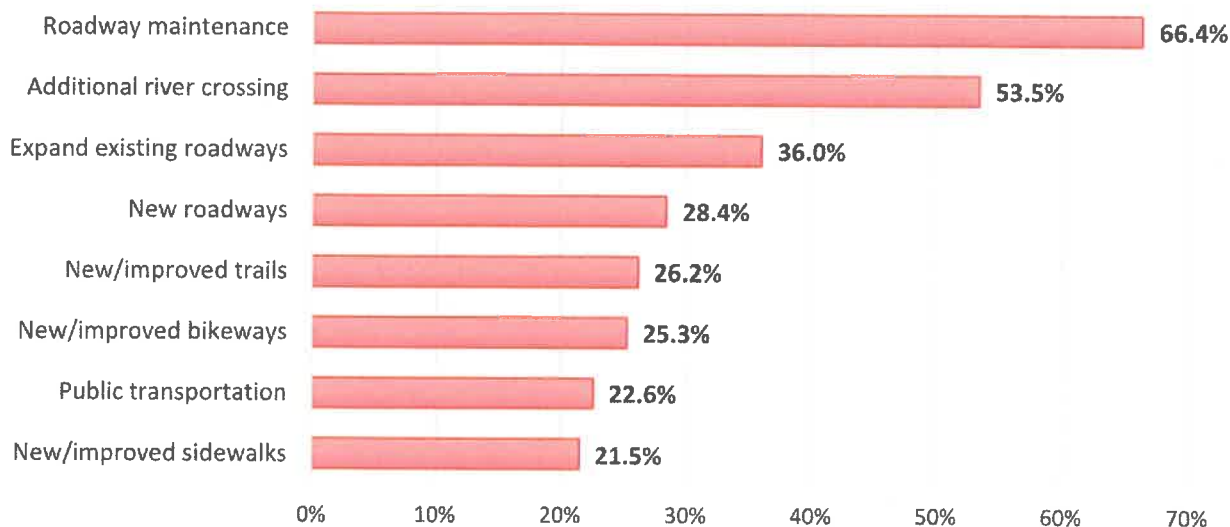
COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Public Input

When posed with the question of “what are the biggest priorities for transportation spending in Valencia County,” a majority of survey responses indicated roadway maintenance (66%) and an additional bridge over the Rio Grande (53%) as their top priorities, with the next highest priority being expansion of existing roadways (36%). Other issues and priorities identified during the public input process include a desire for more trails to serve both recreational and utilitarian trips and improved roadway conditions. Speeding along rural roads was also raised as a concern during the public input process, which discourages both walking and biking.

Positive aspects of the transportation system include short commutes for those who work in Valencia County and easy transportation access to the Albuquerque area, including via the Rail Runner.

Figure 17: Community Survey: Top three priorities for transportation spending in Valencia County



Resident Concerns about New River Crossing

While the regional benefits of the proposed river crossing and I-25 interchange are well established and most respondents indicated the project should be a priority, some Valencia County residents expressed concern about the project during the public input phase of the Comprehensive Planning process. Specific concerns included the loss of existing farmland, short-term congestion during construction, and the potential impacts of moving traffic from NM 6 to a more rural setting.

Five Year Strategic Priorities of Valencia County

Two transportation-related priorities were identified in the 2019 *Five Year Strategic Priorities of Valencia County*. The proposed **I-25 interchange and east/west corridor** continues to be a major priority due its potential to improve regional access and reduce congestion along NM 6. The **maintenance of County roads** is also identified as both a high priority and a major expense. Part of the challenge associated with County road maintenance is the allocation of funds. Valencia County currently allocates its road maintenance budget in equal shares to each of the five districts; however, some districts have more roads to maintain than others. The *Five Year Strategic Priorities* document asserts that the Commission should re-consider how funds are allocated, including whether allocation should be based on the number of miles within each district.

TRANSPORTATION GOALS & ACTION ITEMS

Goal 1: Pursue targeted roadway improvements to improve regional connections and support economic development initiatives.

Action 1-1: Continue to support implementation of the Morris Rd extension and new I-25 interchange

Action 1-2: Utilize a regular GO bond program to support roadway improvements, including drainage, lighting, and multi-modal improvements.

Action 1-3: Support further study of a continuous frontage road along I-25 between the City of Belen and the Village of Los Lunas.

Action 1-4: Pursue roadway improvement projects to enhance drainage, safety, and introduce multi-modal facilities. Desired roadways for improvements include but are not limited to Meadowlake Rd, El Cerro Mission Blvd, and Manzano Expressway.

Goal 2: Support and engage in regional transportation planning and services that transcend jurisdictional boundaries.

Action 2-1: Coordinate with Rio Metro Regional Transit District staff on transit service improvement opportunities

Action 2-2: Participate in the regional transportation planning process to access federal funds and help identify regional infrastructure needs and improvement opportunities.

Goal 3: Invest in multi-modal transportation infrastructure and expand opportunities for Valencia County residents and visitors to travel without a vehicle and engage in recreational activities.

Action 3-1: Consider requirements for sidewalks as part of new developments.

Action 3-2: Pursue sidewalk improvements and street lighting in Priority Growth Areas and along major community access routes such as El Cerro Mission Blvd and Meadowlake Rd.

Action 3-3: Coordinate with incorporated communities, including the Village of Los Lunas and the City of Belen, to implement multi-use trails and on-street bikeways that provide links between communities.

Action 3-4: Work with MRCOG staff on updates to the regional Long Range Bikeway System.

Action 3-5: Coordinate with NMDOT on multi-modal improvements along US and NM highways and on implementation of the NM Bike Plan.

Action 3-6: Pursue a County Parks, Open Space, and Trails Master Plan, including identification of multi-use trails that would serve recreational and general transportation purposes.

Goal 4: Prioritize maintenance of the Valencia County transportation system.

Action 4-1: Preserve and maintain existing County-owned roads in good condition.

Action 4-2: Consider a regular pavement assessment program to document existing conditions and identify priorities for maintenance and improvements.

COMMUNITY SERVICES AND UTILITIES

This chapter documents the public services available for Valencia County residents, as well as gaps and areas of potential service improvements. Though the primary focus of this chapter is on services and facilities operated by Valencia County, the sections below also reference services provided by the other agencies and jurisdictions that are available to all Valencia County residents.

COUNTY ADMINISTRATION

General Administrative Structure

Valencia County is responsible for providing a range of governmental services to unincorporated areas of the County which includes land that is located within Valencia County but not under any municipal, state, federal, or tribal jurisdictions. Governmental services provided by Valencia County for these unincorporated areas include law enforcement, fire protection, community programs, and land use regulations, while utilities are provided by private operators.

Valencia County has ten elective positions including five County Commissioners, County Clerk, County Treasurer, County Assessor, County Sheriff, and the Probate Judge. These elected officials each serve 4-year terms. Table 36 contains the duties of elected administrative officials in Valencia County.

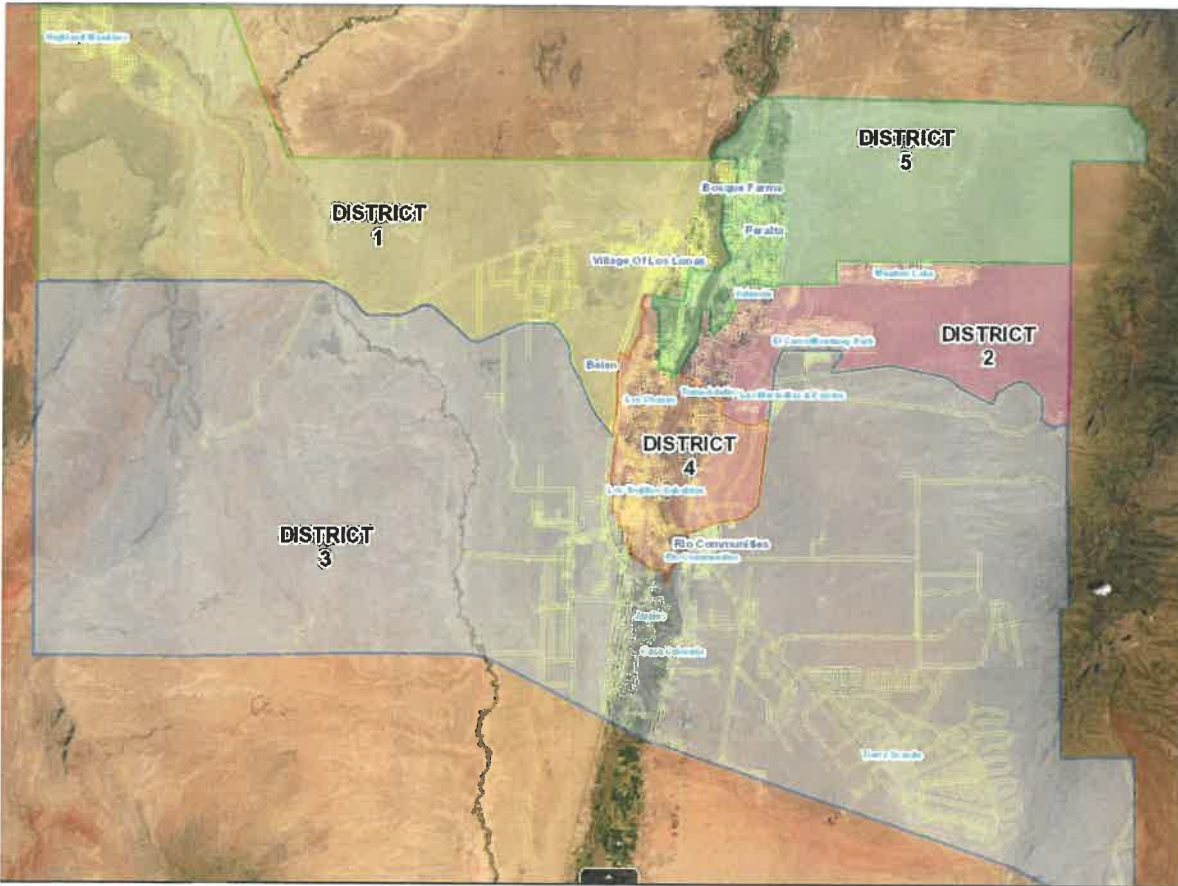
Table 36: Elected Administrative Officials in Valencia County

Official	Duties
County Clerk	Principal roles include custodian of all permanent records, the administrator of elections, and the clerk of the Probate Court. Additional duties include collecting fees from liquor establishments, filing transfers of property, and issuing marriage licenses and firework vending permits.
County Assessor	Responsible for the assessment of property values in Valencia County. Provides the County government with the information related to the current tax base upon which property tax levies may be assessed.
County Treasurer	Distribution of property tax notices and bills and collection of payments for property taxes and other County dues. Responsible for managing investment of County funds.
County Sheriff	Responsible for overseeing law enforcement in unincorporated areas of Valencia County
Probate Judge	Responsible for presiding over cases involving the settlement of wills, estates, and other related conflicts.

County Commission

Valencia County's principal governing body is the County Commission. The primary duty of the Commission is to create policies for the safety and well-being of the citizens that reside in the unincorporated areas of Valencia County. Among the legislative powers of the County Commission include preparing the County budget, levying taxes on property, issuing special bonds for special purposes, making appointments to boards and commissions, adopting ordinances, and acting as the zoning authority for the County. The County Commission is made up of five commission districts (see Figure 18). Each of the Commissioners is elected to represent the district in which they reside.

Figure 18: Valencia County Commission Districts



Source: Valencia County

County Manager

The County Manager is the chief administrative officer of Valencia County. The responsibilities of the County Manager include enacting ordinances, regulations, and resolutions passed by the Board of County Commissioners, as well as the hiring of County employees, overseeing the day-to-day operation of the County government, and advising the Commission. The County Manager is an appointed position that serves at the will of the County Commission.

ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATIONS

Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District

The Valencia Soil and Water Conservation District (VSWCD), formed in 1947, is a unit of state government that encompasses over 1.4 million acres, including all of Valencia County, small portions of Bernalillo County and Socorro County, Isleta Pueblo, and Laguna Pueblo. Under New Mexico law, the District is responsible for the conservation and sustainability of natural resources such as agriculture, soils, water, plants, and animals. The District is funded primarily by a mill levy, along with modest amounts of resources provided by the State of New Mexico.

VSWCD pursues a number of projects aimed at conservation of soil, water, and other natural resources; improving riparian and watershed health; increasing wildlife habitat; volunteer and other outreach opportunities to the community; and technical and financial assistance for farmers. Current projects in Valencia County include education programs at the Whitefield Wildlife Conservation Area and the East Valencia Urban Garden Program.

Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District

The Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District (MRGCD), headquartered in Albuquerque, operates and maintains facilities that provide irrigation, river flood control, and water conservation services to irrigators and farmers in central New Mexico. In total, MRGCD provides irrigation water to approximately 60,000 acres along a 150-mile length of the Rio Grande. MRGCD is ultimately responsible for ensuring the viability of water resources along the Middle Rio Grande basin and plays a critical role in the delivery of water to farmers in Valencia County, as well as to Texas as part of the Rio Grande Compact. MRGCD also oversees the use of its facilities for recreational activities. Valencia County maintains a representative on the MRGCD board of directors.

Valley Improvement Association

The Valley Improvement Association (VIA) is a non-profit property owners association that has managed 61,000 acres and tens of thousands of residential lots across Valencia County since 1969. In summer 2021, the VIA announced its intention to dissolve due to financial considerations, and Valencia County is in negotiations to assume ownership and maintenance responsibilities for various facilities that had been maintained by the VIA. Historically, the VIA has managed the water and sewer services maintenance and improvements of roads, trails, and parks, overseen enforcement of local development covenants, and partnered with local school districts on development of new educational facilities. Among the communities and subdivisions overseen by the VIA include Las Maravillas, Rio del Oro, and Canyon del Rio.

UTILITIES

Waste Management

Solid Waste

Valencia County currently contracts with Universal Waste Services for solid waste collection and disposal (a company is selected through a competitive bidding process every eight years). Curbside waste collection is offered by Universal Waste Services for a fee, though household participation is not mandatory and Valencia County residents must choose to opt in to waste collection services. Residents also have the option of taking their waste to various drop-off sites, including for a fee at the Conejo Transfer Station on the East Mesa. The Conejo Transfer Station, which is also administered by Universal Waste, is used for the disposal of solid waste including old appliances, furniture, and other household waste. Virtually all solid waste is transported out of the County for disposal at a regulated landfill.

Per Valencia County staff, illegal dumping is a serious issue and there are various public areas that require clean-up. To combat illegal dumping, Valencia County participates in the Keep America Beautiful Program and sponsors clean-up events throughout the County. The Public Works Department also hires youths for regular clean-up efforts.

Recycling Services

A curbside recycling program has been considered in the past, though no formal program currently exists. Valencia County residents may take approved recycled materials directly to the Conejo Transfer Station. A link to accepted items is provided on the Valencia County website.

Wet Utilities

Water and sewer infrastructure in unincorporated Valencia County are limited and the majority of households rely on local wells for water resources and septic systems for wastewater. A few households on the outskirts of Belen and Los Lunas are also connected to municipal water and sewer systems, while some institutional users in unincorporated areas, such as the Correctional Facility, are connected to municipal water and sewer systems.

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Some newer subdivisions and communities that had been developed by the VIA, including Las Maravillas, are served by the Rio del Oro Wastewater Treatment Plant. Nearby institutional users, including UNM Valencia and Valencia High School are also connected to the treatment plant. However, the dissolution of the VIA is creating uncertainty over the administration of the Rio del Oro Wastewater Treatment Plant.

Since there are no comprehensive water systems in unincorporated areas of Valencia County, the only option for residents is to have their own well. Across New Mexico, some communities choose to pursue centralized systems due to the greater sustainability in terms of supply and the removal of financial risks from individual users. However, there are significant obstacles to pursuing such a system in Valencia County. Specific challenges include resolving issues related to ownership of wells and water rights, while infrastructure connections to individual residences would be challenging given the housing stock in Valencia County, including the large numbers of mobile homes. The existing system puts the costs of maintenance on landowners, and some residents lack the resources to either construct new wells or to pay for repairs to pumps or other components.

Dry Utilities

Natural Gas

Natural gas in Valencia County is provided by the New Mexico Gas Company, though many residents rely on propane gas tanks. No issues were raised during the public and stakeholder outreach components of the Comprehensive Plan.

Electrical

The primary provider of electrical service across Valencia County is the Public Service Company of New Mexico (PNM), with some communities in the southeast portion of the County served by Socorro Electric Cooperative. However, some individual homes in unincorporated areas are not connected to the grid.

Broadband/Internet

A smaller share of Valencia County residents has access to both the internet and to broadband or high-speed internet than Bernalillo County and the state of New Mexico. Overall, about one-quarter of Valencia County households lack any form of internet access, while only 21%, or about one in five households, has access to broadband internet. By contrast, about 42% of Bernalillo County households have access to broadband.

Existing internet providers include Rio Cities, CenturyLink, HughesNet (satellite), Plateau Communications (fiber optic-broadband), and Trans World Network, though many areas feature low internet download speeds for individuals. Xfinity is available for residents in Valencia County who are directly located alongside a fiber line only.

In fall 2021, the County undertook a pilot project using funds from the American Rescue Plan to construct a wireless tower to expand internet access. The project resulted in access for approximately 800 homes. The County subsequently began efforts to understand gaps in broadband access across the unincorporated communities. Valencia County can further expand access to high-speed broadband by prioritizing discretionary spending toward modern technology, encouraging broadband adoption, working with local Internet service providers, and coordinating with the state, neighboring counties, and regional organizations for state and federal grant funding.

Table 37: Rates of Access to Internet by Jurisdiction

Place	Households with Internet	Households with Broadband
Valencia County	74.4%	21.0%
Bernalillo County	84.3%	42.0%
New Mexico	78.8%	30.0%

GENERAL COUNTY SERVICES AND AMENITIES

Recreational Opportunities

Valencia County's open spaces are integral to the quality of life for Valencia County residents and have important social and public health benefits. Recreational spaces provide opportunities for learning, relaxation, and contribute to mental well-being. In particular, these amenities provide opportunities for physical activity and spending time outside which, in turn, can improve both the mental and physical well-being of Valencia County residents. Parks, open spaces, and trails can also help to preserve and manage natural resources for the enjoyment of residents and visitors for generations to come. Ultimately, opportunities for recreation and outdoor activity build social capital by increasing the desirability of the County as a place to live and spend time.

Community Centers and Public Parks

Formal parks and recreational opportunities in unincorporated areas are generally provided through a series of community centers operated by Valencia County. Since Valencia County does not have a formal parks and recreation department, various services are provided by the Community Development Department, while site upkeep is provided by the County Maintenance Department. A number of public parks are located in Los Lunas and Belen, while playgrounds and fields are present at elementary schools throughout the County.

Meadow Lake Community Center: This multi-generation facility includes various senior services, including a senior meal program, as well as a Head Start program for Valencia County youth. Other facilities include indoor and outdoor recreation equipment and community meeting spaces.

El Cerro Community Center: Services include Head Start youth program, a senior meal program, and community meeting spaces. Recreational facilities include a playground, basketball court, and soccer fields. The community center also features a community garden, which is supported by a range of local agencies and non-profit organizations.

Jarales Community Center: The Jarales Community Center hosts literacy programs and various community groups. There are also two baseball fields are also present on site; however, the fields are overgrown and not actively maintained.

Del Rio Senior Citizen Center: The Del Rio Senior Citizen Center is located in and operated by the City of Rio Communities, though the building is owned by Valencia County. Services include a senior meal program, classes and activities, and community meeting space.

Tomé-Dominguez Hall: This facility is maintained and operated by the Town of Tomé Land Grant and features a museum and library that are open to the public certain days of the week. Tomé-Dominguez Hall is open to the public on a rental basis.

Park of Tomé: The Land Grant of Tomé maintains a small park that was formerly part of the plaza in front of the Tomé historic church.

Las Maravillas Community Park and Nature Trail: Amenities in Las Maravillas had been privately constructed and maintained by the VIA, though will likely be maintained in the future by Valencia County. See the Transportation chapter for additional discussion on trails and bikeways.

Meadow Lake Parks Association. The Meadow Lake Parks Association is a nonprofit community organization whose mission is to revitalize, develop, and manage lands on the original Meadow Lake site in order to return the land to an open space park that will promote the best interests of the community, the land, and the wildlife through positive outdoor learning events and workshops.

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National Forest Land: Valencia County residents have access to the Cibola National Forest and the Manzano Mountains Wilderness Area on the east side of NM 47, near the City of Rio Communities.

Municipal Recreation Programs

The Village of Los Lunas and City of Belen both operate Parks and Recreation Departments which oversee a range of parks, community centers, and recreational programming. Youth summer programs and sports are open to residents of unincorporated Valencia County. Additional community centers are located in Los Lunas, Belen, and Bosque Farms.

Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area

In 2003, VSWCD acquired a 97-acre tract of land in unincorporated Valencia County near the City of Rio Communities, historically known as the Whitfield-Trammell Property. The Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area, designed to preserve the natural Bosque of the area, has been put into a permanent conservation easement with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services Wetlands Reserve Program for restoration and protection of the area. The site is now open to the public for recreational and educational purposes.

The Conservation District has constructed and currently maintains moist meadow units and new wetlands, ensures the protection of existing wetlands, plants a food plot for migrating and resident birds and wildlife and has restored native vegetation in riparian buffer zones for food and shelter for wildlife.

All-Terrain Vehicles

The popularity and usage of all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and side-by-sides (SxS) has increased considerably throughout Valencia County in recent years. Due to the large amounts of unmonitored open space available throughout the County, and the current lack of formal ATV parks, unregulated (often illegal) usage of ATVs and SxS has led to the creation of informal trails. These informal trails can have adverse effects on the natural environment, in addition to leading to increased amount of fugitive dust.

Education

Primary and Secondary Schools

The two municipal school districts present in Valencia County include Belen Consolidated Schools and Los Lunas Public Schools. Enrollment in these districts includes students from unincorporated Valencia County. Pueblo of Isleta Elementary School is a tribal controlled grant school for students in kindergarten through grade 5 and is part of the Los Lunas Public School system. Total enrollment for the Belen Consolidated School District and Los Lunas Public School District in school year 2021-2021 was just under 12,000 students. Enrollment was consistently above 12,000 students between 2016 and 2020, and the lower enrollment in 2020-2021 may be a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 38 provides data on school enrollment by district, per the state Public Education Department, while Table 39 provides a list of public educational facilities. In addition to public schools, there are a number of private schools and academies across Valencia County.

Table 38: New Mexico Public Education Department Yearly Enrollment by District - Valencia County

School District	2016-2017	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Belen Consolidated	<u>3,921</u>	<u>3,913</u>	<u>3,916</u>	<u>3,865</u>	<u>3,667</u>
Los Lunas Public	<u>8,547</u>	<u>8,585</u>	<u>8,622</u>	<u>8,551</u>	<u>8,057</u>
TOTAL	<u>12,468</u>	<u>12,498</u>	<u>12,538</u>	<u>12,416</u>	<u>11,724</u>

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Table 39: Public Schools in Valencia County

School Name	School District	Level	Type
Belen High	Belen	High	Public
Belen Infinity High	Belen	High	Public
Belen Middle	Belen	Middle	Public
Central Elementary	Belen	Elementary	Public
Dennis Chavez Elementary*	Belen	Elementary	Public
Jaramillo Community School	Belen	Elementary	Public
La Merced Elementary (Rio Communities)	Belen	Elementary	Public
Rio Grande Elementary	Belen	Elementary	Public
The Family School	Belen	School	Public
Gil Sanchez Elementary	Belen	Elementary	Public
Bosque Farms Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Ann Parish Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Central Park Elementary School	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Century Alternative High	Los Lunas	High	Public
Desert View Elementary*	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Katherine Gallegos Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Los Lunas Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Los Lunas Family School	Los Lunas	School	Public
Los Lunas High	Los Lunas	High	Public
Los Lunas Middle	Los Lunas	Middle	Public
Raymond Gabaldon Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
School Of Dreams Academy	Los Lunas	Academy	Public
Sundance Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Tome Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public
Valencia High*	Los Lunas	High	Public
Valencia Middle School*	Los Lunas	Middle	Public
Peralta Elementary	Los Lunas	Elementary	Public

*Indicates the school is located in unincorporated Valencia County

Valencia Soil & Water Conservation District

VSWCD employs staff dedicated to education and outreach for both students and adults across Valencia County. Initiatives include free environmental education programs to all schools in the Los Lunas and Belen School Districts and adult education and training programs on sustainable farming practices.

NMSU-Valencia Extension

The NMSU-Valencia extension is home to the NMSU College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences, which supports a range of training and educational programs available to Valencia County residents. The programming provided by the extension includes nutrition and diabetes education, small-scale mixed vegetable production, forage production, and emergency preparedness and food safety. Classes, content, and programming are posted regularly to the NMSU-Valencia Extension website.

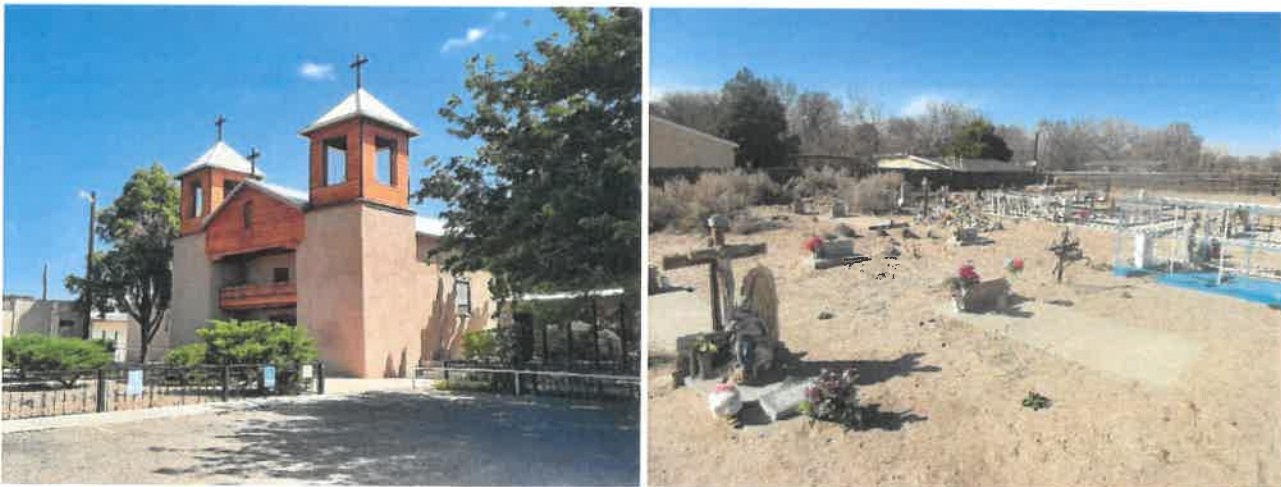
UNM Valencia Campus

University of New Mexico (UNM) Valencia Campus is a satellite campus located east of NM 47 in Tomé, about halfway between Belen and Los Lunas. UNM Valencia offers Associate degree programs and certificates in various trades and technical programs. The general mission of the UNM Valencia campus is to prepare students for the workforce and to prepare students to complete a four-year degree. UNM Valencia serves a high share of first-generation college students, as well as part-time and non-traditional students, and classes and degrees at UNM Valencia can be easily transferred to UNM to allow students to complete Bachelor's degree programs. In 2021, there were 2,041 total students at UNM-Valencia, of which only 28% were full-time. UNM also recently opened a Workforce Training Facility in the Village of Los Lunas to support local business and economic development.



Cultural Patrimony

The nearly four centuries of Hispanic settlement in Valencia County has left its mark on the natural and cultural landscape through features such as the community cemeteries in Tomé and Los Sedillos, as well as the acequia systems that provide irrigation to local farms. Perhaps the most noteworthy cultural site in the Tomé Catholic church. The Nuestra Señora de la Inmaculada Concepción de Tomé was initially constructed in 1750 and is a central feature of the Tomé Land Grant and a significant marker of the County's Hispanic cultural patrimony.



Tomé Hill Park/El Cerro de Tomé

Tomé Hill Park, referred to in Spanish as El Cerro de Tomé, is located six miles south of Los Lunas and east of the Rio Grande in the unincorporated community of Tomé. Tomé Hill is a year-round hiking destination with several miles of trails and is the site of a large annual pilgrimage on Good Friday. The hill lies along the Rio Grande rift, an ancient geologic uplift. Tomé Hill Park is a National Historic Trail landmark as identified by the National Park Service due to its religious and historic significance as a landmark of El Camino Real, a path the Spanish soldiers took as they traveled across missions in the 1600s. Petroglyphs are also present along the hill that span from 3000 BC to the 17th century.



Public Safety

Fire Department

The County is served by the Valencia County Fire Administration, which includes various County fire districts (see Table 40) and municipal fire districts (including Belen, Bosque Farms, Los Lunas, Peralta, and Rio Communities). The Valencia County Fire administration is staffed by a small number of administrative employees and career firefighters and EMTs and is supported by a network of more than 100 volunteers. Improvements and renovations to fire stations and equipment purchases are identified in the Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan.

The *Valencia County Community Wildfire Protection Plan*, adopted in May 2012, identified the following goals:

- **Educate members of the public** so they can reduce their dependence on fire districts because these resources are often stretched thin during fire season.
- **Greater emergency planning** in communities where response times for emergency services may be greater than in municipal zones.
- **Increased enforcement of the weed ordinance** to consistently mandate yard clean-up and maintenance.
- **Create defensible space** as the “fastest, most cost-effective, and most efficacious means of reducing the risk of loss of life and property.” Although fire agencies can be valuable in providing guidance and assistance, creating defensible space is the responsibility of the individual homeowner.
- **Reduction of bosque fuels** as a means of reducing wildfire risk within the Rio Grande river shed. Several methods are commonly used in treating bosque fuels, including manual treatments (e.g. crew-implemented cutting with chainsaws) and mechanized treatments (e.g. mowing, mastication, and whole tree removal).

Table 40: Valencia County Fire Districts

Valencia County Fire Districts		
Tomé/Adelino		
Valencia/El Cerro		
Meadow Lake		
Los Chavez		
Peralta		
Highlands Meadows		
Jarales/Pueblitos/Bosque		
Manzano Vista		

Law Enforcement/Sheriff's Department

Law enforcement in Valencia County is challenging due to the extensive area to control and scattered development patterns. While Belen, Bosque Farms, and Los Lunas are covered by their local police departments, the Valencia County Sheriff's Department responds to all other needs. The Sheriff's Office operates from a centrally located facility, which houses the Field Services Division and Criminal Investigations Division. The Court Services Division is responsible for security of the district court, prisoner transport statewide and process service throughout Valencia County.

Judicial System

The judicial system of Valencia County is comprised of a magistrate court, municipal courts (in each of the municipalities), a district court, a Probate Judge, and a District Attorney. The magistrate court has three judges, two of which are located in Los Lunas, and the other in Belen. The magistrate court hears small civil and criminal cases and can try all misdemeanor cases, while the municipal courts (located in Belen, Bosque Farms, and Los Lunas) enforce the municipality's criminal ordinances. The Probate Judge is an elected position serving a four-year term.

Valencia, Cibola, and Sandoval Counties are in New Mexico's 13th Judicial District. District courts in New Mexico hear the most serious civil and criminal cases and have the most wide-ranging jurisdiction of any trial court. District courts also hear appeals from the lower courts. The district court of Valencia County is located in the County seat of Los Lunas.

Detention Facility

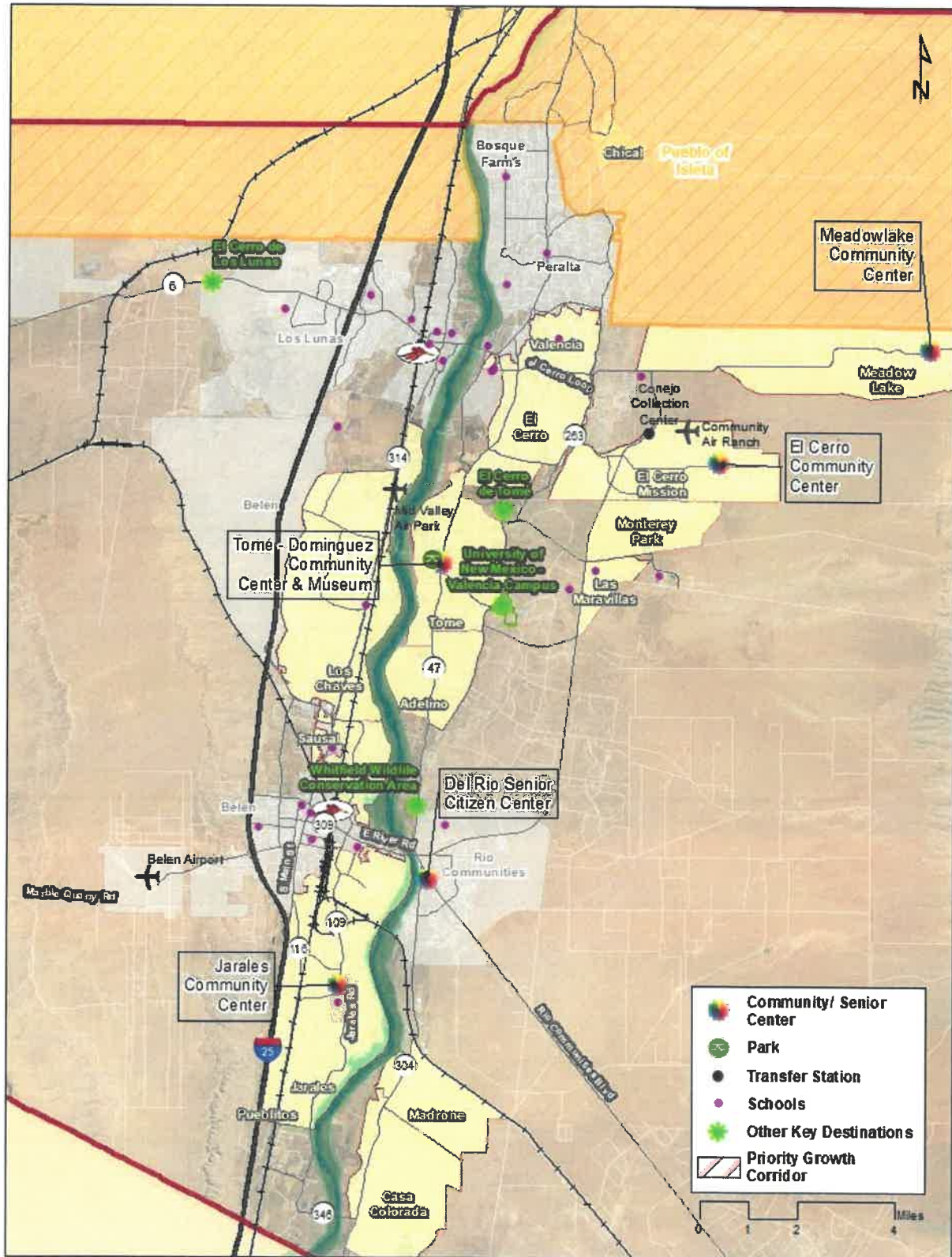
The **Valencia County Detention Center** features a staff of over 50 and 160 beds for both male and female adult inmates. Detention Center services provided to inmates include medical, mental health, and food service. The ultimate mission of the Detention Center is to promote and maintain public safety through effective detention and re-entry practices. Inmates at the Valencia County Detention Facility may be sentenced to no more than 364 days by the Courts and may be detained in a pre-trial status for as long as is necessary to complete their trial. The Detention Center was initially privately-operated, through has been administered by Valencia County since 2005. The **Central New Mexico Correctional Facility** is a maximum security corrections facility located in Los Lunas. The prison is a 480 bed, state-managed facility.

Libraries

There are four public libraries in Valencia County that are all located within municipal limits including: Belen Public Library, Bosque Farms Public Library, Los Lunas Public Library, and the Rio Communities Public Library.

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Figure 19: Community Services and Facilities Across Valencia County



Healthcare and Medical Facilities

Presbyterian Family Healthcare provides services at clinics in Belen and Los Lunas, including urgent care, primary care, and specialty care. The facilities are available to all Valencia County residents. However, Valencia County lacks a hospital or comprehensive medical facility. For services that are not available locally, residents must travel to Albuquerque, where there are several regional hospitals, as well as a trauma center.

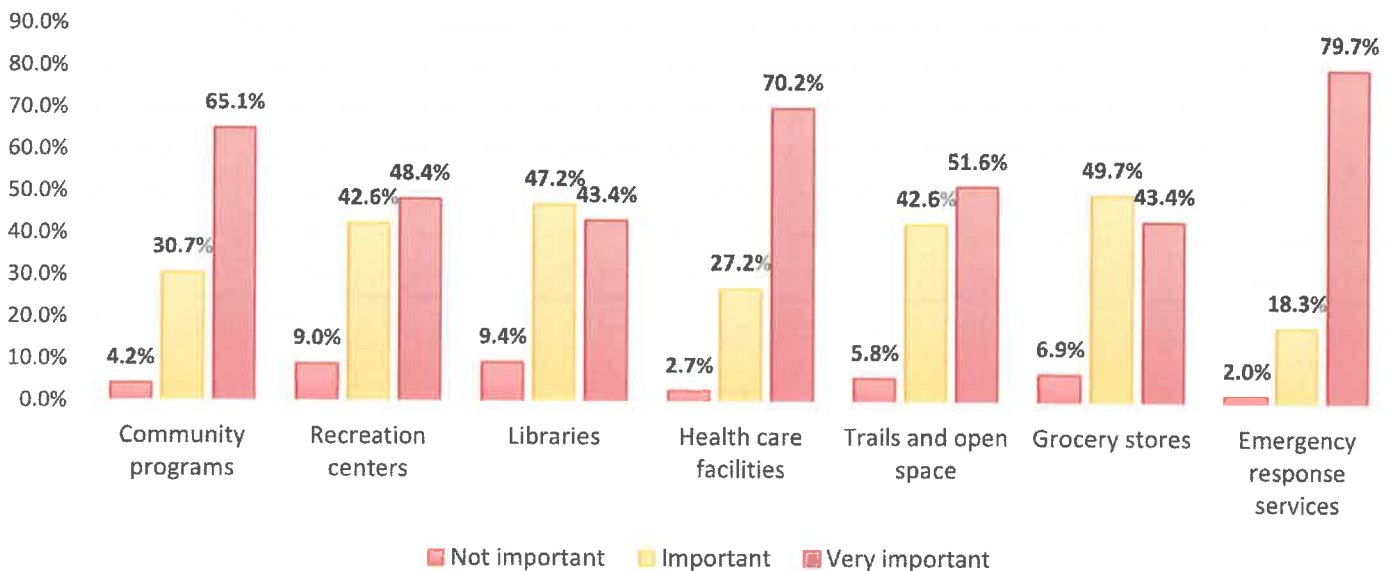
A medical facility has long been a priority in Valencia County. In 2006, County voters approved a property tax measure “to pay for the cost of operating, maintaining or providing for a hospital/24 hour emergency health care facility.” However, plans to construct a medical facility have failed to materialize for both political and financial reasons. As of 2021, Valencia County was conducting a feasibility study to determine the types of services that would be needed most. The preferred location for a health care facility has not been determined.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES AND FUTURE NEEDS

Public Input

As part of the public input survey, participants were posed with the question of how they would rank different community services from “not important” to “very important.” Almost all survey respondents indicated emergency response services (98%) health care services (97.3%) and community programs (95.8%) such as youth programs and farmers markets as being either “important” or “very important” community services for Valencia County.

Figure 20: Community Survey Question: How important are the following community services to you?



Community services were a regular topic of discussion during the public outreach process. The following topics were discussed during the various community outreach events held during the planning process:

- **Water Supply and Quality:** During the outreach process, some residents who rely on wells raised concerns about water quality issues.
- **Telecommunications:** Improved telecommunications throughout the County, including wireless internet, were requested by multiple attendees as one of the services needed, especially in the Meadow Lake area.
- **Waste Disposal:** Illegal dumping is a serious concern across unincorporated Valencia County. Some staff and members of the public questioned whether making curbside pick-up optional contributes to the issue.

- **Emergency Services:** Multiple attendees desired additional funding for emergency services and first responders due to the current strain faced by existing first responders to adequately serve the County.
- **Recreational Opportunities:** Multiple attendees noted a general need for greater recreational opportunities throughout the County, such as educational youth programming and recreational leagues. Additional comments were related to greater multi-use trails, access to historic/cultural sites via biking trails, and designated ATV trails.
- **Developer Requirements:** One attendee commented that the County needs to use the Comprehensive Plan and the prospect of additional growth as an opportunity to impose stronger requirements on developers, including community services such as parks and curb and gutter. If the County does not demand this infrastructure, the public pays for its installation later.
- **Cultural/Educational Facilities:** One attendee proposed a modern expo/events center that would support livestock events, horse and dog shows, rodeos, and other exhibitions. The space could be used for educational purposes to support the agricultural heritage of the County. Valencia County also lacks a conference center that could attract visitors from around the state for events.

Key Opportunities

Parks and Recreation

Valencia County should respond to the demand for increased recreational facilities and community services through the creation of a formal Parks and Recreation Department that administers facilities and programs. In particular, a Parks and Recreation Department could conduct regular programming to engage the community of Valencia County, including educational workshops and festivals, youth and adult sports leagues, and other public events.

A first step could be to develop a Parks, Open Space, & Trails Plan. This plan can be used to assess existing parks and recreation facilities, identify specific types of desired recreational opportunities and suitable locations within the County for potential new facilities, and identify potential funding sources for facilities and programming. Considerations should include facilities for ATV users so that off-road vehicle use can be managed in a sustainable way. A major focus of the plan should be the financial obligations required to maintain a Parks and Recreation Department and to offer ongoing programs and site maintenance. Financial planning will be critical to ensure that new facilities and programs are sustainable and well maintained over time.

A formal department would create additional opportunities for Valencia County to coordinate with local municipalities and other agencies develop complementary programming. Planning efforts should catalogue the collective set of recreational opportunities currently available to Valencia County residents, then identify specific gaps that could be filled by Valencia County and other agencies. For example, Valencia County can leverage the recreational opportunities provided by VSWCD through the Whitfield Wildlife Conservation Area and the youth programming offered by incorporated municipalities. This approach would allow for Valencia County to pursue more targeted investments in facilities and programs and ensure that residents have a wider variety of recreational opportunities.

Expanded Community Services

Valencia County could pursue a facilities asset management plan that can be used to determine potential locations for additional community assets and to provide a management process for existing facilities. The plan could begin with a needs assessment to identify the gaps in existing community services and the specific types of desired recreational facilities and opportunities. The plan should contain recommendations and a priority action items to address community needs. Valencia County should consider opportunities to coordinate with incorporated communities and provide complementary rather than duplicative services. Additional considerations could include the development of additional facilities for waste disposal and an assessment of access to parks and opportunities for recreation by sub-area of the County.

One particular consideration is the construction of a County Expo Center. An expo center could be used to host events and programming geared towards fostering the rural, agricultural identity of Valencia County, such as stock shows, rodeos, a County fair, and other festivals. An appropriate first step may be a feasibility study to determine specific programming, facility size, and potential locations.

COMMUNITY SERVICES GOALS AND ACTION ITEMS

Goal 1: Create a formal Parks and Recreation Department that administers facilities and programs.

Action 1-1: Develop a Parks, Open Space, & Trails Plan to assess needs of existing facilities and identify specific opportunities for new recreational facilities

Action 1-2: Consider the construction of an Expo Center that could host events and programs to support the rural and agricultural identity of Valencia County.

Goal 2: Enhance community services to improve quality of life for Valencia County residents.

Action 2-1: Pursue the development of a Valencia County Medical Facility that would ensure greater access to healthcare services and would meet the needs of changing demographics and provide critical services for an aging population.

Action 2-2: Develop an asset management plan to document conditions of existing facilities and determine potential locations for additional community assets

Goal 3: Expand broadband infrastructure and improve access to high-speed internet.

Action 3-1: Prioritize fiber network infrastructure over legacy copper cable infrastructure with all broadband-related activities.

Action 3-2: Coordinate with the surrounding counties and regional organizations to compete for state and federal grant funding that supports broadband deployment.

Action 3-3: Encourage households to adopt broadband where infrastructure is available by providing information about current federal programs that offer consumer subsidies on internet bills.

Action 3-4: Develop relationships with current local Internet service providers for future information sharing and grant writing activities.

ENVIRONMENT & NATURAL RESOURCES

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Valencia County features a variety of natural resources, including the Manzano Mountains to the east, the Rio Grande and its lush Bosque which runs through the middle of the County, and the sprawling desert plains of the Rio Puerco valley to the west. While the majority of the land area is comprised of shrubland (nearly 70%), small packets of forest, riparian woodlands, grasslands, and steppe habitats can also be found within Valencia County.

The major populated areas of Valencia experience a high desert climate with average high temperatures in the low 90s in the summer and low temperatures below freezing in the winter. With an average annual rainfall of less than 10 inches, Valencia County is particularly vulnerable to droughts as well as wildfires along the Bosque and Manzano Mountains. These risks are exacerbated by a changing climate. This chapter outlines existing environmental conditions, climate and natural risks across Valencia County, and current efforts to mitigate those risks.

WATER RESOURCES

Water resource availability is critical for agriculture and other local industries and is among the primary concerns of Valencia County residents who participated in the Comprehensive Plan development process. Among the specific concerns are that variable precipitation and low water surface levels make farming increasingly challenging. Most residents of unincorporated areas rely on surface water for agricultural purposes and wells for drinking water; across the Middle Rio Grande Region, 62% of surface water is utilized for agricultural purposes. Long-term projections for surface water supply indicate that water resource challenges are only likely to worsen.

Because of the reliance on surface water, Valencia County is vulnerable to drought across the larger Rio Grande watershed. Increased droughts, variable precipitation levels, and lower levels of snowpack in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado will significantly reduce the reliability of surface water resources for agricultural purposes over time. According to the *West-Wide Climate Risk Assessment: Upper Rio Grande Impact Assessment*, completed by the Bureau of Reclamation in 2014, there is projected to be a 25% reduction in water flows along the San Juan-Chama system, which is imported into the Rio Grande, and a 33% decrease in native flows along the Rio Grande by 2100.

Additional work completed for the *Futures 2040 Metropolitan Transportation Plan* (MRCOG 2015) indicated water flows could decrease by 7% along the San-Juan Chama system and 3% along the Rio Grande by 2040. As water consumption needs increase due to higher temperatures and supplies decrease due to the effects of climate change, supply is further constrained by the Rio Grande Compact, which requires specific amounts of water be delivered along the Rio Grande to the Elephant Butte Reservoir for downstream consumption.

Strategies identified in the Middle Rio Grande Regional Water Plan include increased stormwater management, watershed management, and better supply management through adjudication of water rights disputes. An additional recommended strategy, the treatment of effluent for reuse, is not currently feasible in unincorporated areas as most residents are on septic systems.

CLIMATE AND NATURAL HAZARDS

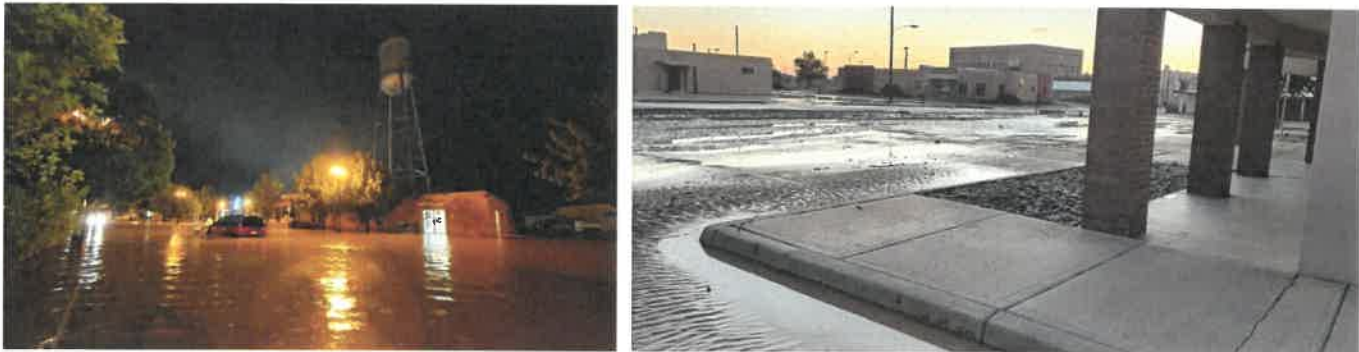
General Hazards and Risks

The following section details the specific climate hazards which currently impact Valencia County. Table 41 contains an overview of individual hazards a risk assessment for the County as determined by the *Valencia Hazard Mitigation Plan*, and mitigation actions the County can take going forward.

Major hazards with a high probability of future events include drought, wildfires, extreme precipitation events, and flooding, while other events that pose risks and occur with some regularity include high winds and extreme heat. Other hazards considered in the Hazard Mitigation Plan but considered lower risk and/or less likely to occur with high frequency include severe winter storms, earthquakes, tornadoes, and dam failures.

The National Risk Index, a tool recently-developed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, quantifies the risks faced by communities against 18 natural hazards. The National Risk Index is meant to illuminate for local communities where they should focus their energies and generally reinforces the findings from the *Hazard Mitigation Plan*. According to the FEMA tool, there are relatively high risks associated with droughts and flooding, the latter of which produces the greater annual financial loss due to natural hazards with an average annual cost to County residents of \$3.3 million in property value. The actual cost of individual flooding events can be substantially higher.

Figure 21: Flooding in Belen, July 2021



Source: KRQE

VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

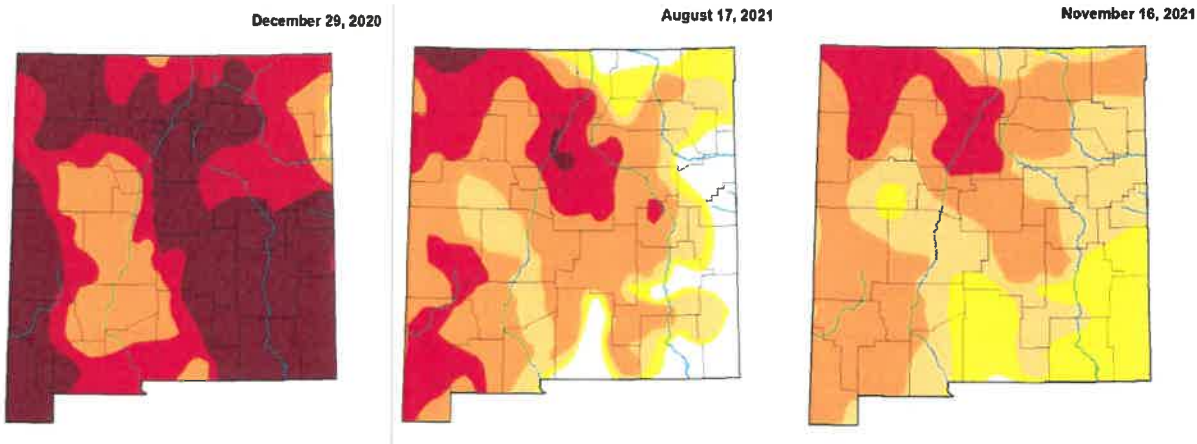
Table 41: Natural Hazards and Probability of Future Events in Valencia County

Natural Hazard	Probability of Future Events	Definition and Considerations
Drought	High	Droughts are prolonged periods without rainfall and are a regular occurrence throughout New Mexico. Losses from drought affect various systems, such as agriculture, water supplies, recreation/tourism, and biodiversity. Critical issues for Valencia County include effects to surface water supply. Secondary consequences include increased wildfire risk as well as increased flood risks when extreme rainfall occurs after extended dry periods limit the ability for soil to absorb precipitation.
Extreme Precipitation Events	Likely	A significant portion of the County’s annual rainfall occurs during the summer monsoon season. However, extreme events can cause damage due to the intensity of storms and can result in flash floods. Lightning during the monsoon can also ignite wildfires. Though total precipitation is expected to remain generally the same over time, climate projections indicate that when rainfall does occur, it is more likely to take the form of an extreme event.
High Winds	Likely	High winds occur when large air masses of differing temperatures meet, which leads to thunderstorms, tornadoes and other events. These storms are highly unpredictable and can move through an area very quickly or linger for several hours. High winds can cause direct damage to crops, buildings, infrastructure, and people or animals through impacts from flying and falling debris or the winds themselves. Areas along the Rio Grande valley are at higher risk than other parts of the County, and wind gusts on I-25 can impact travel conditions.
Wildfires	High	The risk of wildfires increases as temperatures rise and precipitation becomes more variable. Catastrophic wildfire occurs when vegetation is consumed at a high-intensity leaving the burned area susceptible to erosion. In addition to the damage caused by the fire itself, vegetation loss from wildfire can increase flooding potential and other water stresses. The Manzano Mountains and Rio Grande Bosque will be increasingly susceptible to wildfires, especially as drought events increase in length and intensity.
Extreme Heat	Likely	Extreme heat refers to when temperatures reach 10 degrees or more above average temperature for a sustained period of time. The effects of extreme heat will grow as average temperatures increase over time, including the number of days per year above 90 and 100 degrees. Risks associated with high heat include cramps, fainting, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke, especially for vulnerable population without access to air conditioning, the elderly, and the ill.
Flooding	High	Riverine flooding occurs from the inundation of floodplains from extreme rainfall or snowmelt and is characterized by a gradual and predictable rise in a river or stream due to persistent precipitation. Flash floods refer to flooding events that occur suddenly after a short, intense downpour. Flash floods move and end quickly; however, the damages can be quite severe. While floods and flash floods can occur at any point in the year, most flooding events occur during the summer monsoon season in July and August. The risk for flood damage is greatest within Valencia County for those living along the Rio Grande, next to arroyos, and within flood plains.

Drought Conditions

Prolonged drought conditions have been a regular occurrence in the region since the early 2000s. These conditions increase regional wildfire vulnerability and can also contribute to flash flooding events if the soil is unable to absorb moisture after rain events. Additionally, average reservoir levels throughout New Mexico are at their lowest levels since the mid-1970s. Though conditions improved across the course of 2021, the extent of Valencia County is currently experiencing a state of “severe” drought”; at the end of 2020, the eastern portion of the County was experiencing “extreme” or “exceptional drought.”

Figure 22: New Mexico Drought Status in 2021 - U.S. Drought Monitor



In 2019, MRGCD published the District’s *Drought Contingency Plan*. The plan included an index for monitoring drought and corresponding triggers for drought severity, identified current and future vulnerabilities, and proposed long term mitigation actions and drought response actions. In August 2021, the MRGCD District board voted to end deliveries for irrigation a month prior to normal years as a result of low water availability. As climate change increases the variability of rainfall and the intensity of drought, a reliance upon naturally occurring river flows in the Rio Grande makes the MRGCD, and its partner communities, vulnerable to water shortages under future drought conditions.

Wildfire Mitigation Actions

Mitigation measures can be taken to limit the effects and damages associated with wildfires. Table 42 contains items identified in the Hazard Mitigation Plan as well as other strategies to manage the work of wildfires.

Table 42: Wildfire Mitigation Actions for Valencia County

Defensible Space
Effective defensible space consists of a fuel-free zone adjacent to the home, a treated secondary zone that is thinned and cleaned of surface fuels, and a transitional third zone that serves as a vegetation management area. These components work together in a proven and predictable manner. Zone 1 keeps fire from burning directly to the home; Zone 2 reduces the adjacent fire intensity and the likelihood of torching, crown fire, and ember production; and Zone 3 does the same at a broader scale, keeping the fire intensity lower by maintaining an open condition with reduced fuels.
Fuel Breaks and Open Space Cleanup
Fuel breaks may be created to provide options for suppression resources in timbered areas such as the Bosque. In grassland areas, blading or mowing along the margins of roads, railroads or along fence lines may help to reduce the spread of wildfire. Reducing fire spread along roads and community margins provides access for mitigation resources and firefighters and enhances the safety of evacuation routes.
Growth Management
Wildland-urban interface (WUI) areas are places where the built environment comes into contact with forests and other locations that are vulnerable to wildfires. WUI areas may be located at the outer margins of a town or an area adjacent to occluded open spaces such as a park or river corridor. Encouraging new development in lower risk areas and limiting new development in WUI areas through zoning and other regulations is a primary strategy that may be undertaken by Valencia County.
Weed Abatement
County and municipalities would benefit in the development of one weed abatement policies and ordinances that limit the build-up of potentially flammable vegetation.

Flooding and Flash Flooding

Floods and flash floods are a regular occurrence throughout New Mexico. In severe instances, flooding leads to destruction of property, infrastructure, and even death. Most flood events involve the inundation of floodplains from extreme rainfall or snowmelt. For the purposes of this Plan, this type of flooding is referred to as *riverine flooding*, which is characterized by a gradual and predictable rise in a river or stream due to persistent precipitation. After the stream or river overflows its banks, the surrounding area often remains under water for an extended length of time. In July 2021, major flash flooding occurred in Belen when more than three inches of rain fell in just two hours. The flooding led to a breach of the Highline Canal, a local MRGCD facility and damaged homes, businesses, and public facilities.

Among the challenges for Valencia County is that drainage areas and flooding issues transcend jurisdictional boundaries. In addition, frequent flooding events associated with MRGCD facilities; however, the agency is not a flood control agency and lacks the authority to address comprehensive drainage systems.

Comprehensive stormwater management and flood control strategies will require coordination among numerous jurisdictions. At the time of this writing, discussions were ongoing toward the creation of a local flood control authority that would address flood control and prevention across Valencia County. Such an authority could have taxing authority to generate revenue for infrastructure improvements, pursue floodplain mapping, and develop flood control master plans. Other critical steps would be to establish a governing structure to ensure coordination among numerous jurisdictions and conduct a rate study to determine appropriate fees and revenue generation potential.

EXISTING HAZARD MITIGATION EFFORTS

Emergency Management Plan

The *Valencia County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan* establishes policies and procedures for the respective jurisdictions to prepare for potential natural disasters. The plan establishes guidelines for conducting efficient and effective coordinated emergency operations involving the use of all resources belonging or available to County jurisdictions.

Community Wildfire Protection Plan

The *Valencia County Community Wildfire Protection Plan* (2012) addresses the existing hazards and risks of wildland fire throughout Valencia County and makes recommendations for fuels reduction projects, public outreach and education, structural ignitability reduction, and fire response capabilities. The specific action items identified in this plan can be found in the Wildfire Mitigation Actions section above.

Valencia County Hazard Mitigation Plan

The *Valencia County Hazard Mitigation Plan* (2015) is a planning document utilized by local jurisdictions to proactively reduce consequences of disasters and to “significantly reduce the demand for post-event assistance by lessening the need for emergency response, repair, recovery, and reconstruction.” The mitigation goals in the Plan reflect the aspirations of the County to provide a safe environment, while preserving the cultural sites, natural environment and quality of life associated with Valencia County. At the time of the Comprehensive Plan’s adoption, an update to the *Hazard Mitigation Plan* was still in progress. Suggested mitigation actions from the 2015 plan include increasing awareness and understanding of risks and opportunities for mitigation among residents and enhancing collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies.

New Mexico Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan

The *New Mexico Natural Hazard Mitigation Plan* (2018) details the process used to identify, profile, and assess natural hazards throughout New Mexico, as well as identifying the actions that should be taken to mitigate those hazards. The Plan facilitates the delivery of mitigation grant funding to agencies, jurisdictions, Tribes, and non-profit organizations through FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Assistance grant programs. The Plan also addresses mitigation planning requirements for these grant sources. Of particular risk to New Mexico is the hazard referred to as the “drought-wildfire-flood cycle” in which prolonged periods of drought lead to wildfires, which then amplify the damage caused from flooding.

Valencia County, which is within the State’s Preparedness Area 5, worked with the other local jurisdictions in the Preparedness Area to identify floods/flash floods, drought, and wildfire as equally being top priority planning concerns for the County.

New Mexico Drought Plan

The *New Mexico Drought Plan* (2018) provides the state with an updated approach to protect cultural and natural resources across New Mexico through a) synthesizing previous drought planning efforts and streamlining the content; b) making strategic adjustments to the previous drought plan; and c) laying a foundation for future collaborative improvements. To accomplish these objectives, the Plan describes monitoring activities and defines an operational framework and potential local and state agency responses and responsibilities in drought and drought-related activities. The Plan also identifies short-term mitigation activities that can be implemented to prepare for drought and to minimize the impacts of future droughts. As it is intended to be updated every five years, the Plan provides an opportunity for Valencia County to coordinate on drought mitigation and adaption measures with state agencies and surrounding counties.

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

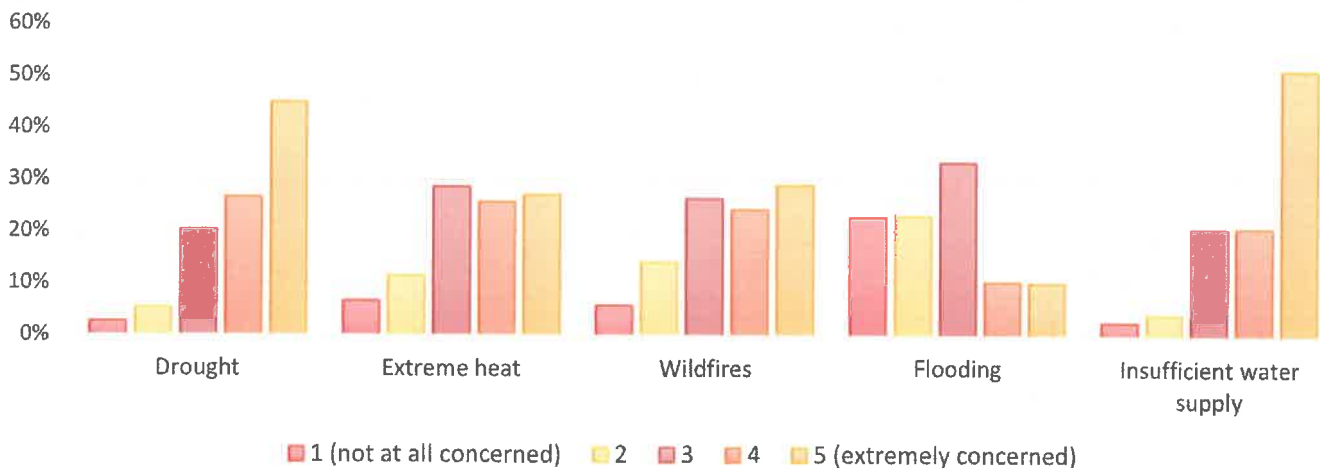
Over the course of the community outreach process, multiple attendees raised concerns regarding water availability in the future, and specifically, the level of the region’s aquifers. When posed with the question of rating their individual level of concern for different climate hazards, survey respondents indicated an insufficient water supply (51.5%) and drought (45%) as being the most concerning climate hazards facing Valencia County. Multiple respondents and attendees also indicated their concern from water availability in the verbal and written comments received. Table 43 and Figure 23 contain detailed data from the survey responses regarding concern for climate hazards going forward.

Additional comments received during the outreach process include illegal dumping occurring in County open spaces and the fire danger posed by brush and debris in the Bosque. Other attendees raised concerns about the potential for power outages at critical times as the heat and drought worsen. Some attendees asserted that current electrical service is no longer consistently dependable, and power outages occur regularly ranging from 10 minutes to several hours. In addition, open space, and specifically the Bosque, have been identified as being essential to the quality of life of County residents. Efforts should be taken to preserve open space and natural habitats whenever possible.

Table 43: Community Survey Question: How concerned are you about the following hazards and extreme events?

Climate Hazard	1	2	3	4	5
-	<i>not at all concerned</i>			<i>extremely concerned</i>	
Drought	2.7%	5.4%	20.3%	26.7%	45.0%
Extreme heat	6.7%	11.6%	28.7%	25.8%	27.2%
Wildfires	5.8%	14.2%	26.4%	24.4%	29.1%
Flooding	22.7%	23.2%	33.4%	10.5%	10.2%
Insufficient water supply	2.7%	4.2%	20.7%	20.9%	51.5%

Figure 23: Community Survey Question: How concerned are you about the following hazards and extreme events?



ENVIRONMENT AND NATURAL RESOURCE GOALS AND ACTION ITEMS

Goal 1: Conserve the open space and natural habitats of Valencia County.

Action 1-1: Limit development in wildland-urban interface areas through updates to the zoning code and requirements for defensible space around new housing.

Action: 1-2: Identify additional parcels that could be acquired and dedicated as open space.

Goal 2: Promote water conservation through programs for County residents and regional surface water supply management.

Action 2-1: Create education and incentive programs for the reduction of water use.

Action 2-2: Partner with farmers and other agricultural stakeholders on water management programs

Goal 3: Reduce the environmental footprint of County facilities and vehicles.

Action 3-1: Explore steps to reduce the emissions of all County-owned facilities, including the conversion to renewable sources of energy like solar and wind to power County buildings.

Action 3-2: Replace County vehicle fleet over time with higher-efficiency, hybrid, or electric vehicles.

Goal 4: Participate in local, regional, and statewide water and hazard mitigation planning efforts.

Action 4-1: Explore water reuse programs, including the viability of expanded sewer systems with water reuse components.

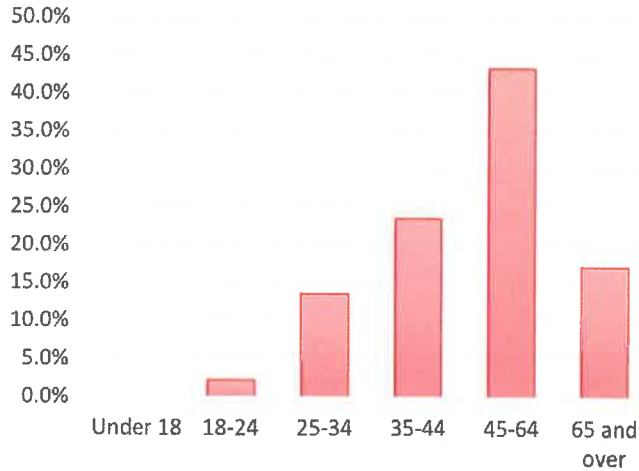
Action 4-2: Update the *Hazard Mitigation Plan* and regularly assess the conditions of critical infrastructure, such as flood control facilities.

Action 4-3: Support a local flood control authority that raises local revenue for critical infrastructure.

APPENDIX: COMMUNITY SURVEY RESPONSES

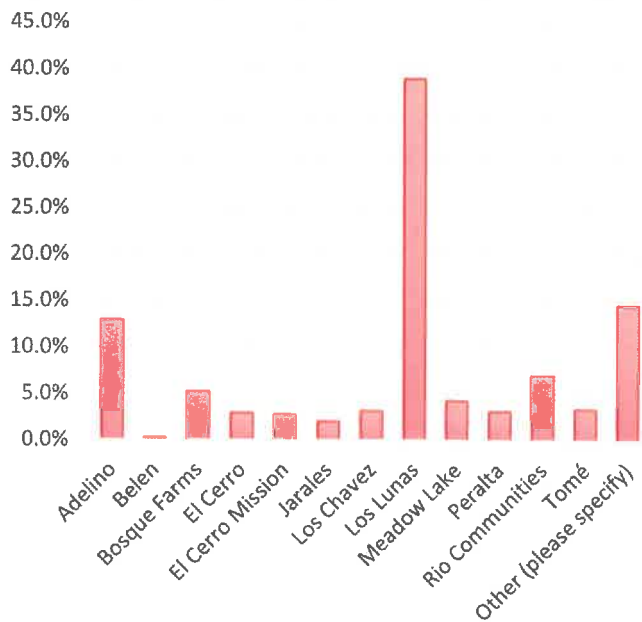
What is your age?

Age	Count	Percent
Under 18	0	0.0%
18-24	10	2.2%
25-34	61	13.6%
35-44	106	23.6%
45-64	195	43.4%
65 and Over	77	17.2%



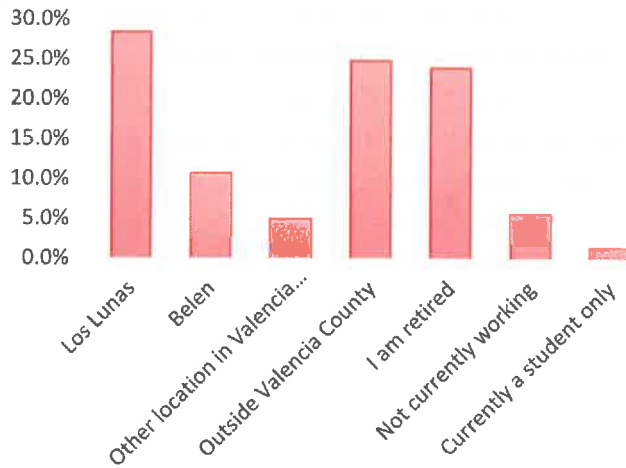
What is the name of your home community?

Community	Count	Percent
Adelino	58	12.9%
Belen	1	0.2%
Bosque Farms	23	5.1%
El Cerro	13	2.9%
El Cerro Mission	12	2.7%
Jarales	9	2.0%
Los Chavez	14	3.1%
Los Lunas	175	39.0%
Meadow Lake	19	4.2%
Peralta	14	3.1%
Rio Communities	31	6.9%
Tomé	15	3.3%
Other	65	14.5%



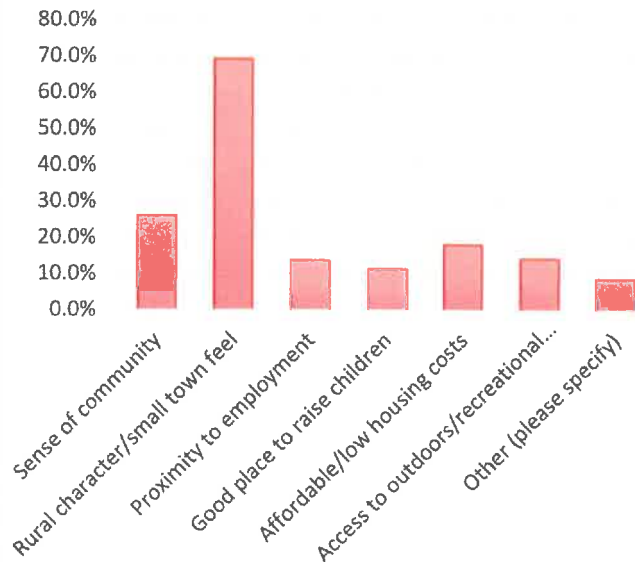
Where is your place of work?

Work Location	Count	Percent
Los Lunas	128	28.5%
Belen	48	10.7%
Other Location in Valencia County	22	4.9%
Outside Valencia County	112	24.9%
I Am Retired	108	24.1%
Not Currently Working	25	5.6%
Currently a Student Only	6	1.3%



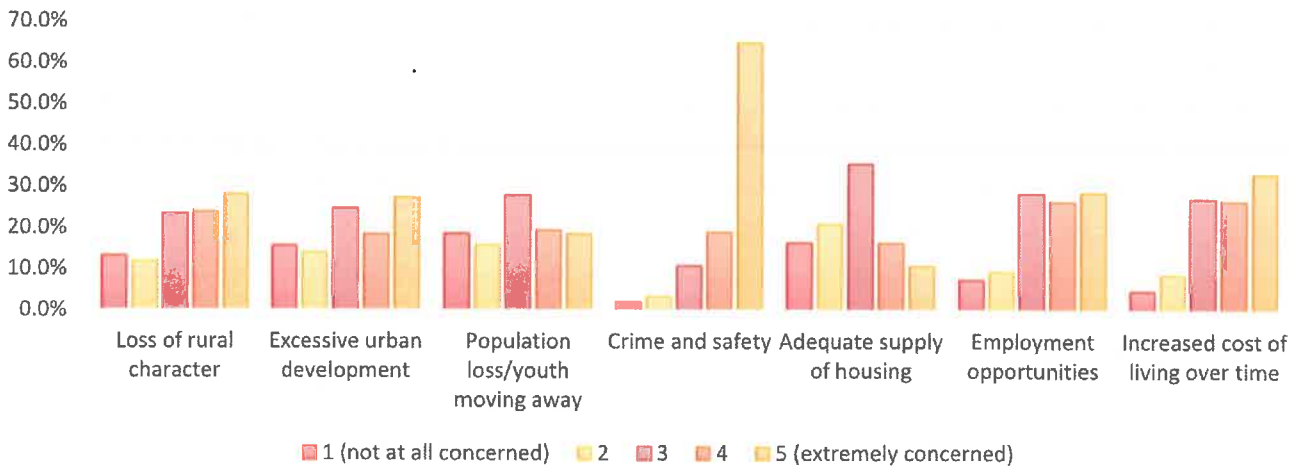
What do you like most about living in Valencia County? (Choose top two)

Element	Count	Percent
Sense of Community	116	25.8%
Rural Character / Small Town Feel	312	69.3%
Proximity to Employment	61	13.6%
Good Place to Raise Children	51	11.3%
Affordable / Low Housing Costs	81	18.0%
Access to Outdoors / Recreational Opportunities	64	14.2%
Other	38	8.4%



How concerned are you about the following issues for the future of Valencia County?

Issue	1 (Not At all Concerned)		2		3		4		5 (Extremely Concerned)	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Loss of Rural Character	59	13.1%	53	11.8%	104	23.2%	107	23.8%	126	28.1%
Excessive Urban Development	70	15.6%	63	14.0%	110	24.5%	83	18.5%	123	27.4%
Population Loss / Youth Moving Away	83	18.5%	71	15.9%	124	27.7%	87	19.4%	83	18.5%
Crime and Safety	9	2.0%	15	3.4%	48	10.7%	85	19.0%	290	64.9%
Adequate Supply of Housing	73	16.3%	94	21.0%	159	35.6%	73	16.3%	48	10.7%
Employment Opportunities	33	7.4%	42	9.4%	126	28.2%	118	26.4%	128	28.6%
Increased Cost of Living Over Time	21	4.7%	39	8.7%	121	27.0%	119	26.5%	149	33.2%



From your perspective, how would you rate the quality of life in Valencia County?

Rating	Count	Percent
Excellent	47	10.4%
Good	246	54.7%
Fair	131	29.1%
Poor	26	5.8%
Comments/Observations	56	



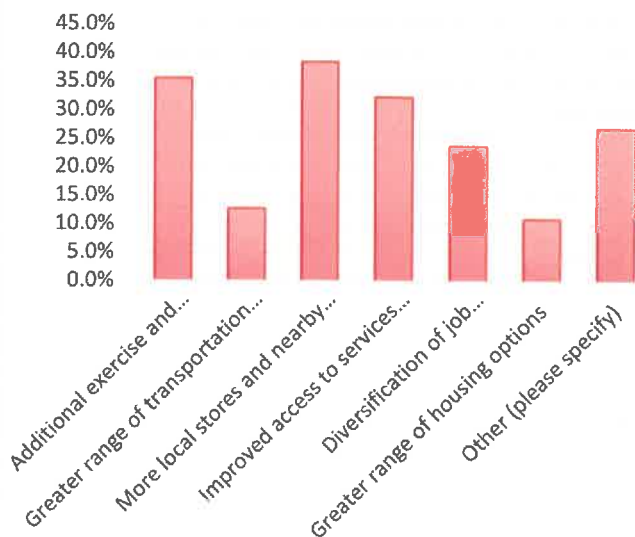
Do you believe the quality of life in Valencia County is:

Rating	Count	Percent
Improving	118	26.2%
Declining	169	37.6%
Remaining the Same	163	36.2%
Comments/Observations	60	



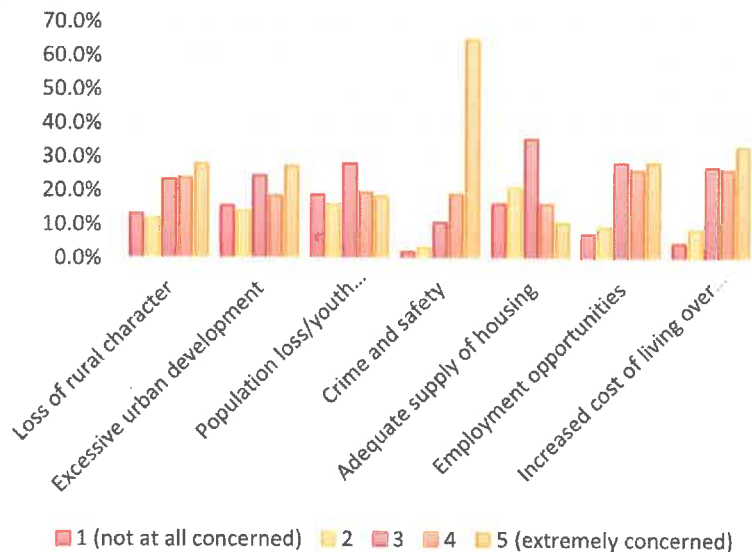
What are the top ways that quality of life could be improved in Valencia County? (Choose top two)

Improvement	Count	Percent
Additional Exercise and Recreational Opportunities	160	35.6%
Greater Range of Transportation Options	57	12.7%
More Local Stores and Nearby Shopping Opportunities	173	28.4%
Improved Access to Services (e.g. grocery stores and medical care)	145	32.3%
Diversification of Job Opportunities	106	23.6%
Greater Range of Housing Options	49	10.9%
Other	120	26.7%



How important are the following for economic development in Valencia County? (Choose top two)

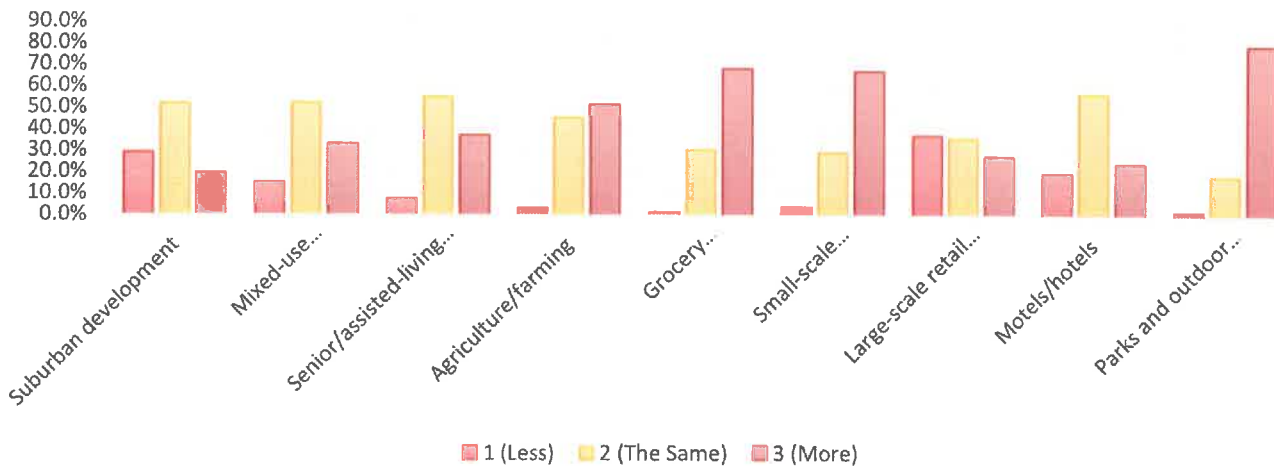
Element	Count	Percent
Incentives to Support Small Business Development	180	40.0%
Improved Transportation Infrastructure	112	24.9%
More Employment Opportunities	130	28.9%
Support for Farmers / Agricultural Workers	162	36.0%
Securing Sufficient Water Supply	154	34.2%
Cost of Living	104	23.1%
Other	21	4.7%



VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

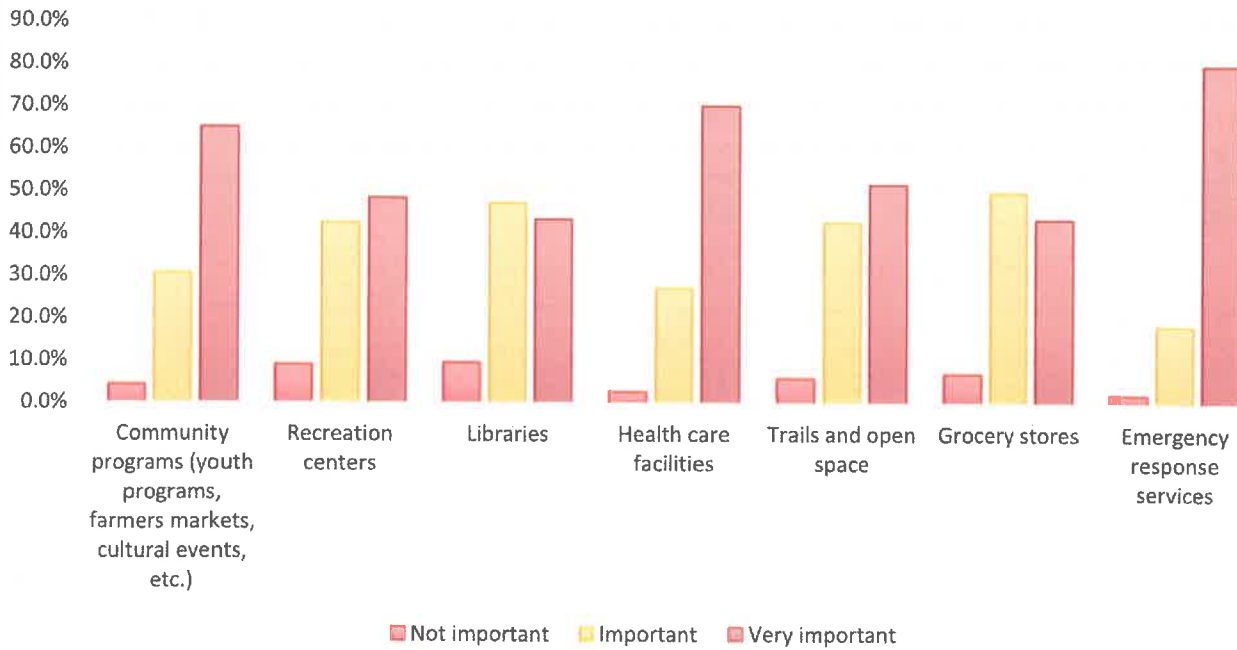
What would you like to see more, less, or the same amount of for the following land uses / business types in Valencia County? (1 = Less, 2 = The Same, 3 = More)

Land Uses / Business Types	1 (Less)		2 (The Same)		3 (More)	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Suburban Development	126	28.9%	226	51.8%	84	19.3%
Mixed-Use Development (Commercial and Residential)	67	15.1%	232	52.3%	145	32.7%
Senior / Assisted-Living Facilities	34	7.7%	243	55.1%	164	37.2%
Agriculture / Farming	15	3.4%	200	45.4%	226	51.3%
Grocery Stores / Farmers Markets	6	1.3%	137	30.4%	307	68.2%
Small-Scale Retail / Restaurants	17	3.8%	129	29.1%	298	67.1%
Large-Scale Retail / Restaurants	166	37.2%	160	35.9%	120	26.9%
Motels / Hotels	86	19.4%	252	56.8%	106	23.9%
Parks and Outdoor Recreation	10	2.2%	83	18.6%	353	79.2%
Other	43					



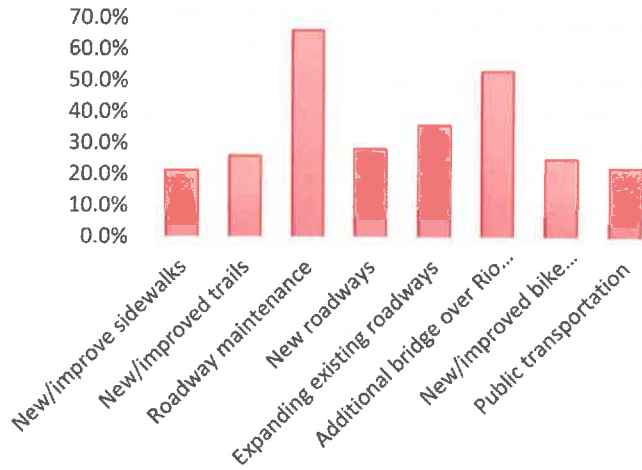
How important are the following community services to you? (Rank as very important, important, or not important)

Community Services	Not Important		Important		Very Important	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Community Programs (youth programs, farmers markets, cultural events, etc.)	19	4.2%	138	30.7%	293	65.1%
Recreation Centers	40	9.0%	190	42.6%	216	48.4%
Libraries	42	9.4%	210	47.2%	193	43.4%
Health Care Facilities	12	2.7%	122	27.2%	315	70.2%
Trails and Open Space	26	5.8%	191	42.6%	231	51.6%
Grocery Stores	31	6.9%	223	49.7%	195	43.4%
Emergency Response Services	9	2.0%	82	18.3%	358	79.7%



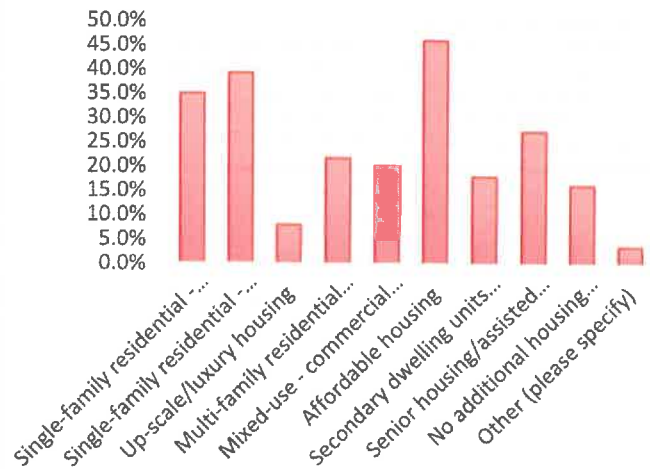
What are the biggest priorities for transportation spending in Valencia County? (Choose top three)

Priority	Count	Percent
New / Improved Sidewalks	96	21.5%
New / Improved Trails	117	26.2%
Roadway Maintenance	297	66.4%
New Roadways	127	28.4%
Expanding Existing Roadways	161	36.0%
Additional Bridge Over Rio Grande	239	53.5%
New / Improved Bike Facilities (e.g. bike lanes or shoulders)	113	25.3%
Public Transportation	101	22.6%



What type of additional housing is needed in Valencia County? (Choose top three)

Housing Type	Count	Percent
Single-Family Residential – Suburban Small Lot	158	35.1%
Single-Family Residential – Rural Large Lot	177	39.3%
Up-Scale / Luxury Housing	36	8.0%
Multi-Family Residential (i.e. apartments)	98	21.8%
Mixed-Use – Commercial and Residential	90	20.0%
Affordable Housing	207	46.0%
Secondary Dwelling Unites (e.g. casitas, tiny homes, etc.)	81	18.0%
Senior Housing / Assisted Living Facilities	123	27.3%
No Additional Housing Needed	73	16.2%
Other	16	3.6%



VALENCIA COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

*How concerned are you about the following hazards and extreme events?
Rank on a scale from 1 (not at all concerned) to 5 (extremely concerned)*

Hazard / Extreme Event	1 (Not At all Concerned)		2		3		4		5 (Extremely Concerned)	
	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent	Count	Percent
Drought	12	2.7%	24	5.4%	91	20.3%	120	26.7%	202	45.0%
Extreme Heat	30	6.7%	52	11.6%	129	28.7%	116	25.8%	122	27.2%
Wildfires	26	5.8%	64	14.2%	119	26.4%	110	24.4%	131	29.1%
Flooding	102	22.7%	104	33.4%	150	33.4%	47	10.5%	46	10.2%
Insufficient Water Supply	12	2.7%	19	4.2%	93	20.7%	94	20.9%	231	51.5%
Other	41									

