

DOWNTOWN COLORADO INC. PRESENTS

COLORADO CHALLENGE PROGRAM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ROCKY FORD FOCUSES ON A SUSTAINABLE JOB ECONOMY WITH THE COLORADO CHALLENGE PROGRAM

July 20, 2020 – ROCKY FORD, CO – Rocky Ford is developing a plan to bring more jobs to town and become more resilient in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The City of Rocky Ford and The Small Town Project have partnered with Downtown Colorado, Inc. (DCI) as part of Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program. The City of Rocky Ford is establishing a Preliminary Redevelopment/Reinvestment plan through participation in the Challenge Accelerator Program. The plan will outline the steps the public sector can encourage greater private sector investment toward the community vision for a sustainable and thriving community.

The Colorado Challenge Accelerator Program is a 12-month team building accelerator focused on engaging and activating community partners to spur community and economic development. The program includes working with Rocky Ford citizens to build a strategy focused on identifying and connecting a sustainable business-ecosystem for entrepreneurs.

“The Town of Rocky Ford has struggled with the challenges of disinvestment and population loss for years and without a design and holistic approach to move forward, change will come in the form of deterioration and continued apathy,” said Shannon Wallace, Rocky Ford City Manager, “We see urgency in moving forward now as a chance, especially in the face of COVID-19, to build momentum for our workforce and economy. Our efforts now will assist us in developing a cluster of activity in this area with guidance and partners to help us grow together. We are ready to shape our own change and a project design and feasible action plan will enable us to move forward.” The first step the City has taken for revitalization is the hiring of an Economic Development Coordinator who has assessed needs of local businesses and property owners, is working to build relationships with regional partners, and identify strategies for job growth.

The Small Town Project has been a great partner to the City the past few years. Duane Gurule, the Executive Director highlights their work, “We have initiated efforts through

assisting to promote local businesses through our network and social media channels while encouraging and even challenging our local businesses and owners to give attention to their online presence. We have also started working with community members interested in starting a business and working with them to research the feasibility and develop business plans. Another angle has been approached by reaching out to owners of vacant commercial buildings and retail spaces to understand their leasing information and working to connect business owners with these property owners. Finally, we have been working on developing a program to build a skilled workforce to attain remote job positions.” The goal is to combine these efforts with the Redevelopment Plan developed through the Challenge Accelerator program.

Rocky Ford and The Small Town Project have been working with DCI through this program since the beginning of the 2020. Through stakeholder analysis and a virtual Challenge Studio Workshop, Rocky Ford and DCI have identified new actions the City is prepared to take. In the short term, residents can expect to see increased communication of resources to address immediate needs of the business community and opportunities to provide their feedback and vision for the community. The long term vision for Rocky Ford includes more opportunities for many types of workforce sectors and a vibrant downtown.

The program will continue into the fall of this year as well as 2021. Technical assistance programs include planning support from the Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) and a USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant (RBEG). DCI’s approach with this work will help business and property owners understand investments and how to engage local and outside investors. The project will provide necessary training to Rocky Ford; ultimately helping the community become more proactive with job creation and retention. The specific project will include two (2) key services; namely developing a stronger network of business owners and entrepreneurs, and implementation of a Development Readiness Initiative Training to encourage investment and growth of existing business and use of commercial properties. This support will assist Rocky Ford to understand and formulate an approach to engaging business and property owners, potential entrepreneurs and investors, and build momentum around a more sustainable downtown economy.

There will also be opportunities for community engagement around building a vision, sharing ideas, and having fun shaping the community in the early fall. Local, regional, or state-wide partners interested in engaging with these efforts are invited to connect.

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About Downtown Colorado, Inc.

Established in 1982 as the Colorado Community Revitalization Association, Downtown Colorado, Inc. is a 501(c)3 nonprofit membership organization that aims to build better communities by providing assistance to downtowns, commercial districts and town centers in Colorado. Organization members represent downtown organizations, local governments, development and improvement districts, consultants, individuals and others involved in downtown and community development. Visit downtowncoloradoinc.org for more information.

Downtown Colorado, Inc. is an equal opportunity employer. DCI employs personnel without regard to race, creed, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental handicap, veteran status and marital status.

About The Small Town Project

The Small Town Project was created in the small town of Rocky Ford, a quaint town in Colorado's Otero County. "Our mission is to enhance economic and social vitality in Rocky Ford and improve the quality of life for residents of our community." Visit smalltownproject.org for more information.

About The City of Rocky Ford

Founded in 1887, Rocky Ford is a rural town in southeast Colorado located 165 miles southeast of Denver and 45 miles east of Pueblo on U.S. Highway 50. Our population is approximately 3,900 with a median age of 43, and household income of \$32,000. Rocky Ford is known for producing the world-famous Rocky Ford Cantaloupe and Rocky Ford

Watermelon. Those world-famous watermelons are also the foundation of our local Arkansas Valley Fair, which is Colorado's oldest continuously running fair. Visit <https://www.colorado.gov/rockyford>.

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