

Executive Summary

The Towns of Westcliffe and Silver Cliff contacted DCI and DOLA to conduct a combined Community Revitalization Partnership (CRP) to look at the downtown and particularly how to create and sustain an economically viable business community which would look at: business mix, attraction, and retention, appearance of vacant buildings on main street, historic downtown structures while maintaining historical integrity, infrastructure and drainage issues. The request was made to create and sustain an economically viable business community through a community identity and marketing plan.

Westcliffe has a vibrant tourist and summer resident-based economy between May and September, however, the winter brings a slow-down that, for some businesses, is too much to survive. Silver Cliff suffers much of the same, but is also hampered by the fact there is no visually appealing, economically viable “main street” or “town center” where citizens and visitors can congregate, shop or celebrate.

Both communities, Westcliffe and Silver Cliff (collectively, “the Cliffs”) are filled with dedicated and passionate residents, organizations and elected officials that are striving to make each town a wonderful place to live, work and play. Efforts, however, are somewhat divided and this is contributable to not having a common direction or vision for each community and collectively too. The communities would benefit from determining a point organization to lead main street efforts. Also, by focusing organizational efforts it quite possibly will lead to better utilization of community resources, both financial and human. To ultimately pull this together, the main street corridor must have a clear vision of what it looks like, mix of businesses, and how people will be attracted to visit and also purchase goods and services.

From a promotional stand point, the Cliffs, is situated in such a majestic landscape with many natural, recreational and heritage resources. It seems, however, that the resources are viewed as ordinary because they are just part of “everyday life.” The two communities could better capitalize on the natural beauty and amenities at their doorstep.

Lastly, both Westcliffe and Silver Cliff struggle with an inconsistent year-round economy, which makes living and working in the area a challenge. This requires many to hold more than one job per household to make ends meet throughout the year, as either a business or resident. To address this, the Cliffs, along with the County, need to tackle the economic and market conditions that exist by completing an economic and market analysis to gain an understanding of government finances, population and employment trends, and forecasts as well as an understanding of the local and regional market and economy. The towns and county must create a clear plan for needs and the desired mix of sales tax and job-creating business development for the purpose of creating a 12-month economy.



Background Information

Westcliffe and Silver Cliff are located in south-central

Colorado nestled between the Wet and Sangre de Cristo mountain ranges. Westcliffe is the County seat for Custer County. Situated in the Wet Mountain Valley (Sierra Mojada) at the intersection of two state highways, the Town of Westcliffe presently covers approximately 1.1 square miles of land area and Silver Cliff, at the base of the cliffs to the east is 14.7 square miles.

Westcliffe

Dr. William A. Bell owned the ranch that the original town of Westcliffe is platted on and began to sell his subdivided lots after convincing the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad to extend its rail line to his property in 1881, nearby the booming mining town of Silver Cliff. Westcliffe was incorporated in July 1887 and is named for Westcliffe-on-the-Sea in England, the birthplace of Dr. Bell.

Over the past 113 years, the population of Westcliffe has fluctuated significantly, experiencing the “boom and bust” cycles common throughout Colorado’s history. Westcliffe is once again “booming,” with a strong national and state economy during the last decade fueling new population growth. From 1990 to 1999, Westcliffe’s population increased 52.6 percent, from 312 to 476 persons.



Westcliffe is the region’s economic center, the “downtown” for Custer County and the Wet Mountain Valley. Since 1990, the number of wage and salary jobs in Custer County has doubled, while unemployment rates have dipped to below 5 percent. Average annual wages are also increasing in Custer County, although they still lag behind the state average. Between 1994 and 1999, the average annual wage in Custer County increased from \$13,836 to \$19,117, a 40-percent increase. During that

same time period, average annual wages increased 31 percent statewide, averaging \$34,189 in 1999.

Silver Cliff

In June 1878 silver was discovered on a sheer cliff beside the present location of the town, and thus Silver Cliff’s boom began. Silver Cliff became an incorporated town in February 1879 and as was typical with most Colorado mining towns in the mid to late 19th century, the population grew rapidly. By 1881 it was estimated some 6,000 to 16,000 people were living in Silver Cliff with most searching for fortune in the form of a dark greasy-looking rock, which when melted turned out to be 75 percent silver.

As people continued to pour into the town, some had the forethought to begin the process of planning the physical growth of the town. Soon, streets were surveyed and lots were zoned for homes and businesses. This was also being done in preparation for the arrival of the Denver and Rio Grande narrow gauge railroad; however the railroad stopped a full mile west of the town. And, quietly, but very quickly, Westcliffe zapped the energy from bustling Silver Cliff and it became the central town of the Wet Mountain Valley.

By 1890 mining was dead, businesses went belly-up and the population decreased. The boom days of Silver Cliff were over. According to the 2000 U.S. census, the population of Silver Cliff was 512 and today the estimated population is 589.

There is no large employer in the town of Silver Cliff. With the exception of Family Dollar, the Silver Cliff businesses are homegrown and are operated with fewer than 10 employees and most employ five or less. Some business owners do not hire any employees. A majority of the workforce from Silver Cliff is employed at the county, school or clinic in Westcliffe, are self-employed, are building contractors or they travel to work down-the-hill in nearby Canon City, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs.