

## Analysis

### Item 7: Oregon Business Development Department

#### Rural Opportunity Initiative Report

---

**Analyst:** Steve Bender

**Request:** Acknowledge receipt of a report on the Rural Opportunity Initiative grant program.

**Analysis:** The Oregon Business Development Department (OBDD) submitted a report on the Rural Opportunity Initiative (ROI) grant program. During the 2019 session the Joint Committee on Ways and Means approved a budget note directing OBDD to provide a report on this program:

##### Budget Note

The Oregon Business Development Department is directed to report to the Emergency Board in September 2020 on the Rural Opportunity Initiative grant program. The report shall provide a comprehensive evaluation of the program since inception, including grants awarded, rural communities served, return on investment, coordination with other small business development resources, demonstration of increased entrepreneurial ecosystem capacity, and ongoing sustainability of local programs and technical support services. Return on investment metrics should include, but are not limited to, leveraged funds, number of companies assisted, jobs created, and access to capital.

The ROI program was established in 2016 as a pilot project. The Department used \$260,000 of Lottery Funds in the Strategic Reserve Fund to fund the pilot. The program became fully operational in the 2017-19 biennium when the Legislature provided \$750,000 of Lottery Funds specifically for it. A \$750,000 Lottery Funds allocation was again included for the program in OBDD's 2019-21 biennium budget. The current biennium funding for the program was not reduced in the second special session of 2020.

The ROI program is designed to support the development and growth of locally established companies in rural areas. The program does not support economic development activities designed to attract or increase investments from companies outside the community. The funding awards seek to strengthen rural entrepreneurial ecosystems to support business activity in the local area. Measures of the success of these efforts include higher rates of entrepreneurship, small business resiliency, and capital acquisition amounts. The program to date has supported 25 projects in rural communities, including 4 projects during the 2015-17 biennium, 11 projects during the 2017-19 biennium, and 10 projects in 2019-21. Eight of the ten 2019-21 biennium project awardees received awards in the prior biennium (though usually for different projects), while two were new awardees. A project list is included in the report.

Current-biennium funds were distributed in May 2020. The first reports back from these grant recipients are not due until November of this year, so the report only includes anecdotal information on the impacts of these funds at this point. For the 2017-19 biennium ROI projects, however, OBDD identified impacts that include leveraged funds totaling over \$950,000, plus an additional \$500,000 Oregon Community Foundation grant to Coos Bay for a childcare incubator project; assistance to 249 businesses and 703 entrepreneurs; and the creation of seventeen full-time equivalent jobs and 23

contractor positions. Recipients, however, expressed a need for sustained funding to address economic development needs. Although many awardees have received funds over more than one biennium, ROI grants are provided on a one-time basis and the program does not provided sustained funding for local initiatives.

**Legislative Fiscal Office Recommendation:** The Legislative Fiscal Office recommends that the Emergency Board acknowledge receipt of the report from the Oregon Business Development Department on the Rural Opportunity Initiative grant program.



**MEMORANDUM**

**TO: Interim Joint Committee on Ways and Means**

**FR: Business Oregon**

**DATE: September 4, 2020**

**RE: Rural Opportunity Initiative Budget Report,  
"#2 – Rural Opportunity Initiative Report:**

The OBDD is directed to **report to the Emergency Board in September 2020 on the Rural Opportunity Initiative grant program.** The report shall provide a comprehensive evaluation of the program since inception, including grants awarded, rural communities served, return on investment, coordination with other small business development resources, demonstration of increased entrepreneurial ecosystem capacity, and ongoing sustainability of local programs and technical support services. Return on investment metrics should include, but are not limited to, leveraged funds, number of companies assisted, jobs created, and access to capital."

**Rural Opportunity Initiative (ROI) Report  
September 4, 2020**

**Overview:**

The Rural Opportunity Initiative (ROI) is Business Oregon's strategic effort to empower rural communities to support entrepreneurs and small business growth. Through financial support, innovative partnerships, network expansion, and access to business development resources, ROI helps strengthen and consolidate entrepreneurial ecosystems within and across Oregon's rural communities, with a particular emphasis on diverse populations and low-income people.

At its core, ROI is designed to create an economy that works for all Oregonians. It is inclusive and community-driven, empowering local leaders to define and implement collaborative strategies that elevate the role of entrepreneurship in rural economic development, enabling entrepreneurs to create place-based enterprises that in turn buoy local economies. In lieu of a 'one size fits all' approach with specific objectives to which each community must align, ROI reflects community priorities and acknowledges that the best people to determine the right approach for a community are the residents themselves.

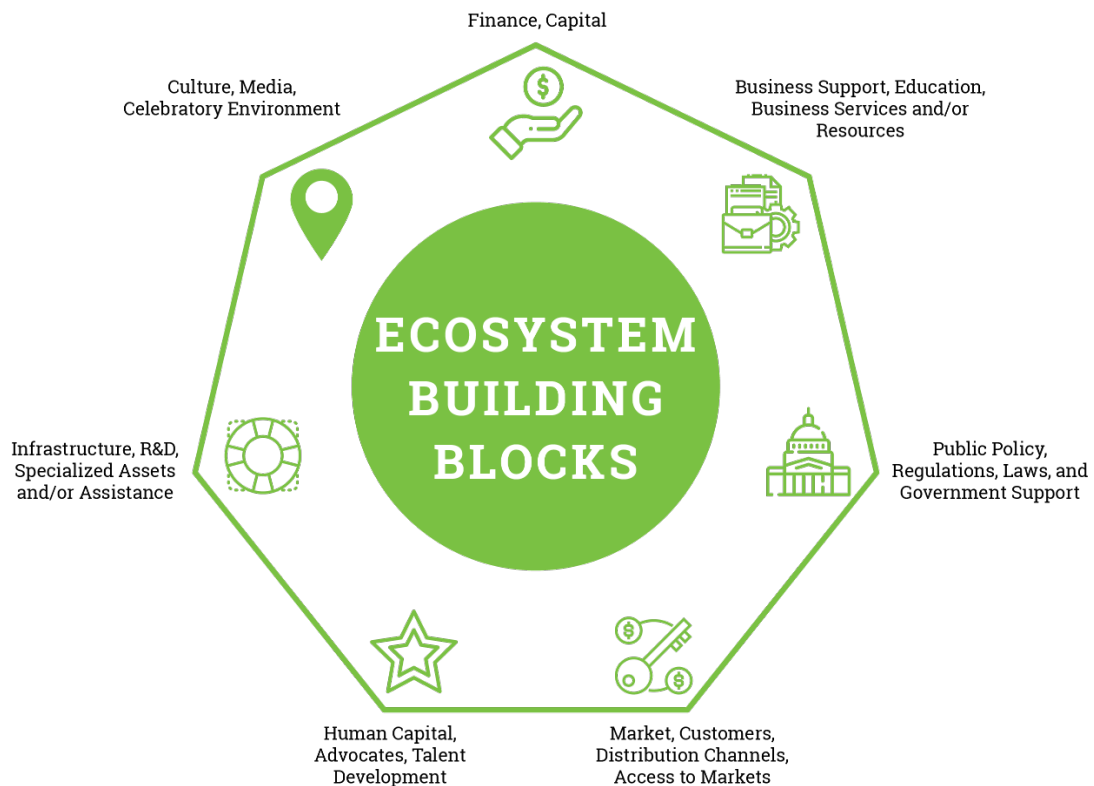
Small businesses and entrepreneurs drive rural economies, and are a major source of opportunity for growth in rural communities. In addition to supporting entrepreneurship and small business growth, ROI's emphasis on cultivating a healthy ecosystem helps build resiliency and makes businesses more likely to survive a crisis by having access to the full complement of integrated resources. In short, by focusing on ecosystem development, ROI helps entrepreneurs thrive in the good times and recover following disruptions.

ROI is an investment in the vision and aptitude of rural communities and aligns with Business Oregon's strategic plan to innovate, grow local businesses, cultivate rural economic stability, and champion opportunity for underrepresented people. This is all the more important in light of the deleterious impacts of COVID-19 in rural communities as well as the opportunities that could manifest due to telework and growing interest in more remote living arrangements.

### Entrepreneurial ecosystems:

A growing body of evidence – both academic and anecdotal – demonstrates the importance of a robust and dynamic ecosystem to entrepreneurship and small business growth. With nearly all net new job creation in the U.S. attributable to new and young companies (less than 5 years old), the case for entrepreneurship as economic development is well-established.

An entrepreneurial ecosystem is the network of individual actors, organizations, institutions, and processes that formally and informally interact to connect, mediate, and govern performance within a given entrepreneurial environment (OECD, 2014). Commonly recognized components of an entrepreneurial ecosystem include finance, business support, public policy, markets, human capital, infrastructure, R & D, and culture – but it is their strength as an interconnected whole that determines the health of an ecosystem and its capacity to support entrepreneurs. Visually, an ecosystem can be represented by the following image:



ROI supports projects demonstrating both a vision and a plan to address identified gaps and inefficiencies in their local ecosystem in order to strengthen its components and their integration in a way that facilitates business incubation. This, in turn, results in entrepreneurial communities that tend to have more economic diversification, greater local control and less dependency on outside forces, and better retention of profits generated within the community – all of which contributes to more vibrant places with higher levels of self-determination.

### Program history:

Launched in 2016, ROI was initially financed through the Strategic Reserve Fund (\$260,000) and private grants. Its purpose was simple, if unconventional: to build capacity in rural communities to ensure rural entrepreneurs have access to the resources needed to launch, grow, and scale viable companies. In seeking to break down barriers, enhance cohesion among existing business resources, and leverage new assets, the program embarked on an effort to foster the development of 'Centers for Entrepreneurship,' essentially one-stop-shops for entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Four rural communities were awarded funding during the pilot round, including:

- o Klamath Falls – Klamath IDEA (\$36,000)
- o La Grande – Jumping Sheet (\$36,000)
- o Coos Bay - REEF (\$36,000)
- o Baker City – Hatch Baker (\$120,000)

Each recipient was charged with opening and operating a Center for Entrepreneurship, participating in a statewide steering committee to foster collaboration among Centers, and generally working to consolidate resources within and without the Center to create local climates and cultures conducive to entrepreneurship. Hatch Baker was designated the lead project and assumed additional responsibilities, including: providing leadership to other Centers, staff Hatch Baker, design and deliver curriculum, develop multimedia and an online investor program, plus general program development and management.

These four rural communities each engaged between five to thirty-five formal partners (nonprofits, cities, civic institutions) in their work, increasing their networks, facilitating collaboration, and minimizing redundancy. In this first year, ROI supported communities in: raising an additional \$100,000 towards their projects; increasing services offered such as one-on-one advising and peer-support events; reaching an additional 35-60 entrepreneurs and small business owners per community; establishing Centers for Entrepreneurship as resource hubs, and generating favorable publicity in the local press around their activities and commitment to entrepreneurship as an economic development tool.

Hatch Baker, located in a town only 10,000 people, reported accomplishing the following during the first year of its project:

- o Direct personal contact with 200 business owners to explore business support needs
- o 78 walk-ins to Hatch Baker seeking business support services
- o Hosted joint classes with NEOEDD
- o Renovated Hatch Baker to include co-working space, conference room, multimedia capabilities
- o Partnered with multiple other agencies to coordinate activities and ecosystem building work
- o Developed StartUp Oregon, a beta online learning network that harnesses existing resources into one accessible place, available to entrepreneurs irrespective of zip code.

Additional pilot round funding resulted in other ecosystem building outcomes, including completion of *Empresas*, a business support program for Spanish-speaking and bilingual entrepreneurs with Adelante Mujeres in Forest Grove as well as a partnership with the Oregon Native American Chamber (ONAC) to ensure ROI reaches Tribal governments and that materials and programming generated are culturally congruent. It is worth noting that the *Empresas* program remains a staple of Adelante Mujeres' entrepreneurship toolkit while ONAC has developed curriculum that is offered in existing ROI communities.

Hatch Baker has since transitioned to Launch Pad Baker and grown in scope and impact as a result of ongoing ROI funding while both Klamath Falls and La Grande remain ROI recipient communities working to strengthen their ecosystems. Coos Bay was not awarded funding in the 2019-2021 biennium due to insufficient progress on their goals.

**ROI during the 2017-2019 biennium:**

In the 2017-2019 biennium, the Legislature allocated \$750,000 to ROI, enabling the program to grow beyond the pilot stage and extend into more rural regions of the state. A competitive RFP process resulted in the selection of 11 ROI communities, representing projects as diverse as establishing a short-haul truckers co-op in eastern Oregon to helping develop a local foods movement to support small fishers, farmers, and restaurateurs on the Oregon coast to creating a nonprofit artist community for the grossly underemployed people of Warm Springs to sell their crafts.

During this biennium, the program also fully embraced the cash plus capacity model, bringing on a nonprofit consultant to assist communities in achieving their goals. Often, but in rural communities especially, time constraints and lack of staff or staff availability encumber the best laid plans – lack of people power is what keeps good projects from being implemented. The consultant provides fund development, marketing acumen, organizational leadership, strategic planning, and more and has become a trusted partner among ROI partners. Cash plus capacity is part of what differentiates ROI from other programs, is crucial to its success, and also led to a Kauffman funded ROI replica program grant that will be explained in more detail below.

**Business Oregon’s Rural Opportunities Initiative Communities (ROI Communities), 2017-2019**

*Eleven unique initiatives elevating rural entrepreneurs and the organizations that support them.*

	<b>Organization and Community</b>	<b>Primary Project Summary</b>
1.	SW Oregon Community College SBDC (\$50,000) Coos, Curry Counties	To renovate the SW Innovation Center to house the REEF (Rural Entrepreneurship Ecosystem Framework) project to co-locate business development services.
2.	Euvalcree: Western Treasure Valley (WTV) Truckers Cooperative (\$80,000) Malheur County	To support Latino/Hispanic short-haul freight owner-operators, designed to give competitive advantage to independent entrepreneurs.
3.	Launch Pad Baker led by Northeast Oregon Economic Development District (NEOEDD) (\$72,000) Union County	To expand capacity to increase accessibility to IDA program, loan programs, and business development resources.
4.	High Desert Partnership (\$44,000) Harney County	To conduct an ecosystem assessment of Harney Co and to increase awareness and delivery of local resources.
5.	City of Independence (\$73,000) Polk County	To conduct an ecosystem assessment and to expand capacity to deliver programming to entrepreneurs, especially Latinx.
6.	Klamath IDEA (\$79,000) Klamath County	To hire an entrepreneur concierge to support business resource navigation and to launch SourceLink to increase access to services.

7.	Tillamook Coast Visitors Association (\$45,000) Tillamook County	To launch bilingual recipe to market classes, create a regional food brand, and conduct a food distribution hub feasibility study.
8.	8 Cities led by Monroe (\$70,000) Linn, Benton Counties	To hire a Venture Catalyst to support entrepreneurs launch and grow their businesses.
9.	City of Veneta (\$36,000) Lane County	To establish a pop up retail district to allow low-cost, low-risk entry into brick and mortar businesses.
10.	Warm Springs Community Action Team (WSCAT) (\$73,000) Jefferson, Wasco Counties	To complete and open The Commissary, which includes a café, Native American art market, shared office space, and more in Warm Springs.
11.	Woodburn Downtown Association (\$45,000) Clackamas, Marion Counties	To develop multilingual technical assistance tools and resources and launch a pilot program to provide financial support to 10 Latinx businesses.

The information below reflects the aggregate achievements of the 11 funded ROI projects that were each at of varying stages within the entrepreneurial ecosystem development framework (concept, launch, scale). Importantly, this work also resulted in several studies and assessments that will guide future program development and resource allocation.

- o Additional funds leveraged – over \$950,000 plus a large OCF grant (\$500,000) to Coos Bay for a childcare incubator project
- o Number of entrepreneurs assisted – 703
- o Number of mentors that provided support to entrepreneurs – 87
- o Companies / businesses served – 249
- o Jobs created – 17 FTE, plus 23 contractor positions
- o Partner organizations involved – nearly 100 organizations (government, nonprofit, for-profit, education, etc.) partnered with ROI communities to support projects and coordinate resources.
- o Revenue raised by businesses supported – over \$1.2 million.

Among the studies and assessments mentioned above that continue to guide ROI projects including a food distribution hub feasibility study, a detailed ecosystem assessment of the High Desert, and the formation of a board led independent trucker co-op to support economies of scale and facilitate access to entrepreneurship within a highly consolidated industry.

Due to staff turnover and ongoing program evaluation, the reporting requirements for ROI communities shifted during the grant term. So while the information above is accurate, it does not reflect the full impact of ROI as communities were not asked to track this data from project inception and some were unable to accumulate data retroactively.

It is also important to note that many of the communities that receive ROI funds are transitioning away from traditional natural resource / extraction industries to more intentional grow your own strategies. This transformation and the tools necessary to make it happen can take time – but supporting full ecosystem development will result in more quantifiable measures down the road, including higher rates of entrepreneurship, small business resiliency, and capital acquisition. As Klamath IDEA Executive Director Kat Rutledge noted, *‘We are blazing trails and challenging the status quo with this work. Like many rural communities, economic development has long-since been defined by industrial recruitment and the care and keeping of large employers and institutions. We are building a new pathway forward.’*

Collectively, the outcomes detailed above demonstrate positive impacts on entrepreneurs (access to resources, job growth, increased revenue) but also indicate enhancements to the ecosystem itself in the form of greater integration among providers, contributions from mentors, and additional funding leveraged, all of which combine to reduce barriers and support small business growth. Or in the language of ecosystem building – they increase *connectivity* among people and providers, support *diversity* of industries and assets, enhance *fluidity* of capital and knowledge, and generate *density* of entrepreneurs and resources.

#### **Select project profiles from 2017-2019:**

##### **Tillamook Coast Visitors Association (\$45,000)**

The project scope included launching Recipe-to-Market classes on business development and marketing for food products, hiring a branding expert to design and promote the sale of local foods, and conducting a study on the need and feasibility of a food hub or food delivery system to relieve the burden on small scale North Coast producers.

Although demand for local food products on the N. Coast continues to grow, constraints on small farmers and fishers have kept them from harnessing opportunities. According to the assessment, ‘self-delivery and marketing of products restricts the supply of locally produced foods,’ as small producers are compelled to sacrifice production for other tasks. The same farmers and fishers often sell in the same communities and their routes routinely overlap, resulting in inefficiencies but also offering the potential for cooperative solutions. As the feasibility assessment recognized, there is a clear need for a ‘centralized hub to aggregate local products, provide information about product availability to buyers, and logistical support to producers’ on storage, transportation, and product marketing. Among the 23 survey participants, there was 100% agreement on the urgent need for a food hub and distribution center and next steps are geared toward establishing it.

Recipe to Market, Farm Direct, and marketing and business classes attracted significant interest and provide 68 attendees with the tools to launch or expand their agriculture or food-based business. OSU Food Innovation Center sent staff to Tillamook to host the Recipe to Market classes, enhancing access for coastal residents and exposing participants to other resources, including OSU Extension, Visit Tillamook Coast, Food Roots, and the local SBDC.

ROI supported brand awareness (logos and marketing campaign) has stimulated additional demand for local products. Last fall, 30 major food buyers – seeking to satisfy requests for coastal food products – planned to come to Tillamook to meet local fishers, farmers, and producers; and in October 2019, a ‘Seed to Table’ food industry tour to Japan with Travel Portland introduced the ‘Oregon North Coast Grown’ brand to a new market. These efforts have in turn attracted additional attention – Sunset Magazine, Portland Monthly, Alaska Air Magazine, and others have featured stories on North Coast foods.

As ROI funding began making an impact, four local farms reported looking for additional acreage to farm to meet growing demand. One of them said, ‘I believe it would positively affect our business given the response I’ve seen from the North Coast Food Trail effort. Our business thrives because of our local food focus.’

Ultimately, this project has shown tremendous promise. The local and regional foods movement is strong, ecologically viable, and in alignment with existing community assets. Successfully opening up opportunities to new enterprises through Recipe to Market as well as a successful branding campaign to



stimulate consumer demand will result in new markets and additional space for entrepreneurship. As importantly, this project reflects the spirit of ROI – local entrepreneurs identified a significant barrier to growth, assessed ways to respond, and coalesced around a solution that enhances their entrepreneurial ecosystem without sacrificing their identity.

In the spring of 2020, the Oregon Lottery produced a video highlighting the impacts of the North Coast Food Trail on the burgeoning small farms, fisheries, and restaurants that feed the region and its economy. ROI was recognized as a critical component in advancing this work and laying the foundation for future growth. <https://vimeo.com/416357373/de8750b3b7>

### **High Desert Partnership (\$44,000)**

The HDP project was designed to serve entrepreneurs in Harney Co., with a particular focus on new and younger entrepreneurs engaged in natural resources, environmental stewardship, and tourism related businesses in order to capitalize on regional strategic assets. HDP worked to identify and bridge gaps among entrepreneurs through the acquisition of a BizHarney Coordinator and undertook a comprehensive study of the region's ecosystem, resulting in a roadmap for the creation of a 'hub of the High Desert.'

In coordination with a network of regional partners, HDP held numerous meetings and outreach events to turn out emerging entrepreneurs and connect them to supportive resources. All told, 30 entrepreneurs were assisted during the project, with 15 volunteer mentors contributing time and expertise to buoy local success. And the ecosystem assessment is a remarkably rich document that describes the status, ease and availability of various conditions, resources, and regulations that influence the ability to start and operate a small business in Harney Co., Oregon. In doing so, it also outlines a strategy for creating a prosperous and sustainable economy that reflects the region's values and competitive advantages.

The result has been an immense growth in interest in entrepreneurship and the consolidation of the resources necessary to support. Entrepreneurism is no longer constrained by geography. Creative people with know-how and an implacable commitment to success live throughout Oregon. The HDP has recognized and harnessed this truism and is leading a development strategy that allows entrepreneurs to lead in creating a vibrant culture and economy in Harney Co.

### **Additional funding leveraged:**

ROI communities have been successful in securing additional funding for their projects from local governments, foundations, and investors. While many of these commitments demonstrate regional buy-in, some larger contributions have come from other sources that reflect a growing awareness and appreciation for the work being done in ROI communities by ROI community members.

- Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation (\$440,000) – a national nonprofit focused on harnessing the power of entrepreneurship to solve problems and increase economic equity funded an ROI replica project to bridge the work of 6 ROI communities between state funding cycles. Rural Development Initiatives (RDI), Foundry Collective, and Kelley Nonprofit Consultants collectively provided the 'capacity' side to each community's 'cash' award. This ROI replica was selected from more than 700 national applicants and Business Oregon has aligned its work with the Kauffman work where applicable.
- Meyer Memorial Trust (\$57,000) – MMT awarded funds to Business Oregon and the University of Oregon to study how and to what degree traditional evaluation metrics fail to reflect the achievements of underrepresented and bicultural populations as well as make recommendations to refine these evaluation tools.

- CRF Small Business Technical Assistance Program (\$300,000) – In August 2020, a contingent of ROI communities led by the High Desert Partnership applied for and were awarded \$300,000 to provide technical assistance to underserved small businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
- USDA REDI – USDA’s Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) is active in two ROI communities, providing federal muscle to help built long-term economic growth in rural areas.

**Feedback from 2017-2019 ROI communities:**

Business Oregon solicited feedback from this cohort of communities at the end of the grant cycle to help assess program strengths and weaknesses. In general, ROI communities were enormously appreciative of the investment in their projects and the agency’s commitment to enhancing rural prosperity. The flexibility of the program – the notion that locals know best and don’t need to be told how to do economic development – was a common refrain. Conversely, it was also noted that the staff change mid-cycle left a void and made it difficult to seek guidance from Business Oregon. Among the biggest challenges cited by ROI communities were related – sustained funding is necessary and building and maintaining relationships is time-consuming. Both are truisms in the economic development world where it can ultimately take years to complete a project, let alone to change a community’s culture.

**ROI during the 2019-2021 biennium:**

The legislature again allocated \$750,000 to ROI for the 2019-2021 biennium. After making some revisions to its evaluation metrics, Business Oregon released an RFP for the third round of ROI in December of 2019. In response to the RFP, the agency received 20 full proposals, from 17 counties, requesting approximately \$1.6 million in funds. In March, 2020, an evaluation committee comprised of internal and external stakeholders selected 10 projects to fund, with the lowest receiving \$44,000 and the highest receiving \$75,000. Again, a consultant was retained to add the requisite capacity for ROI communities and she brings both expertise and continuity.

**Business Oregon’s Rural Opportunities Initiative Communities (ROI Communities), 2019-2021**

*Ten unique initiatives elevating rural entrepreneurs and the organizations that support them.*

	<b>Organization and Community</b>	<b>Primary Project Summary</b>
1.	Mid-Columbia Economic Development District (MCEDD) (\$75,000) Wasco, Hood River County	To support entrepreneurs from low-income and underrepresented communities with business training, capital, and other tools.
2.	Euvalcree: Western Treasure Valley (WTV) Truckers Cooperative (\$75,000) Malheur County	To support Latino/Hispanic short-haul freight owner-operators, designed to give competitive advantage to independent entrepreneurs.
3.	Northeast Oregon Economic Development District (NEOEDD) (\$65,000) Union County	To create the “Center for Excellence in Rural Entrepreneurship” on La Grande’s main street.
4.	High Desert Partnership (\$70,000) Harney County	To create an “Idea-to-Ownership” pipeline accessible to entrepreneurs of all ages and stages of business development.

5.	City of Independence (\$60,000) Polk County	To build a shared kitchen, micro-retail marketplace, and community event space.
6.	Klamath IDEA (\$70,000) Klamath County	To develop a suite of robust online tools to map the local ecosystem and identify gaps.
7.	Tillamook Coast Visitors Association (\$65,000) Tillamook County	To study market conditions, perform a site analysis, and develop a business plan to create a food hub and product delivery system.
8.	Launch Pad Baker (\$65,000) Baker County	To increase staff capacity, marketing, and evaluation to better serve entrepreneurs through Launch Pad Baker, a community resource.
9.	City of Cottage Grove (\$61,000) Lane County	To engage Latino immigrants and high school students in starting food businesses, including a shared food truck where ideas can be tested.
10.	Warm Springs Community Action Team (WSCAT) (\$44,000) Warm Springs Indian Reservation – Jefferson, Wasco Counties	To complete and open The Commissary, which includes a café, Native American art market, shared office space, and more in Warm Springs.

The 2019-2021 ROI cohort received their initial grant disbursement in May 2020 and – like everyone else – has had to evolve their project scopes to compensate for the impacts of COVID. Their ecosystem building work remains ongoing but has largely gone online and transitioned from an emphasis on business growth to business retention as the state and country shed jobs at an unprecedented rate.

But – also like everyone else – ROI communities and the entrepreneurs they support have identified opportunities in the midst of calamity. With a newfound appeal for social distancing and evidence of the efficacy of remote work, rural communities are poised to benefit from new migration patterns as people can retain their jobs but live anywhere they choose. ROI communities and their partners have seen a significant increase in demand for their resources and entrepreneurs are finding ways to adapt, challenge conventional thinking, and create new products and ideas with commercial appeal.

2019-2021 ROI community interim reports are due in November but the following anecdote provides a snapshot of how the program is working in Harney Co.

*In February 2019, the fledging BizHarney collaborative hosted an event: Opportunity Knocks to bring together potential entrepreneurs to learn of their concerns and hopes as business owner in Harney County. This facilitated meeting brought out 30 folks. Apparently, opportunity did knock that night and within a few short months Spark Collaborative Studios formed and secured a main street store front. There were several folks who kept the candle lit to build a unique space for a robust group of Harney County artisans. Tory, Jeff, Jeremy, Marilyn and team have been assisted by Brad Attig, Foundry Collective and with its one-year anniversary behind them (even with COVID) this unique company supports the creatives, makers, builders, innovators, and entrepreneurs of Harney County and beyond. Spark Collaborative Studios is an Oregon Benefit Company and a collaborative effort between Sage DesignWorks, Buzzard Ridge Handmade, and J. Hill Images. Supported by BizHarney through Business Oregon ROI and Foundry Collective, Spark is proving good things can happen in rural places through resourcefulness, ingenuity and collaboration. The online store component of Spark Collaborative Studios, [Spark Mercantile](#), is*

*helping rural artists and creatives (merchants from several Eastern Oregon communities can be found on the site) expand their markets. The hope and intention are to give rural artists a larger voice and broader audience for their goods while putting southeast Oregon on the map for artisans, creatives and makers.*

Ultimately, this is what ROI does. Whether by choice, necessity, or both, ROI communities have and continue to shift from economic development strategies primarily geared towards attracting large new employers to an emphasis on growing existing ones, and supporting entrepreneurial-minded individuals who want to start a business in their community, by conscientiously building entrepreneurial ecosystems that incubate growth in good times and foster resiliency during difficult ones.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your questions.