

public outreach process and methods

APPROACH

Caltrans District 9, in partnership with the Mono County Planning Department, worked with MIG to design and facilitate a public involvement process for the community of Benton following a successful visioning process in the nearby community of Chalfant.

The public outreach process resulted in a community Vision Statement and a series of Guiding Principles and Strategies that can help guide County land use and transportation planning decisions through 2030. These products will help decision-makers determine where and how future growth should occur and to anticipate related highway and safety improvements and access management needs on US 6 and SR 120.

The information developed through this planning outreach process will be incorporated into an update of Mono County's General Plan. Caltrans will also gain information that will inform the development of the

Transportation Corridor Report for Highway 6.

A related goal of the process was to gauge community interest in the release of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) agency lands to facilitate development in the area. The BLM is interested in the process, as agencies may sell, trade or transfer surplus lands to public or private interests for future development through their agencies land tenure process. The BLM could potentially release more than 1,000 acres to the immediate north and south of Benton for development if there was interest in these lands. These lands are one of the few sources of developable land in the County.

Input generated during initial stakeholder interviews informed the design of a public outreach process that included three community workshops. The project team agreed to test several scenarios in order to collect public feedback on the desired size and scale, types of services and amenities, and types of





growth the community might be willing to accept. This information could help inform Caltrans' future efforts regarding the need for a bypass or other improvements. The community was also asked its opinion about improvements that might encourage walkability and community connectivity as well as access to surrounding public land.

The discussions were designed to draw out resident attitudes towards future growth in the area, identify the community's current assets and help shape where potential growth should be directed to maximize benefit for the existing community. There was recognition that development pressure in the area may provide an opportunity for the community to remedy longstanding safety issues and concerns by exacting require-

ments of developers. Increased development and the resulting tax-base could provide the necessary funding stream to support additional amenities and services for the community.

PUBLICITY

The partnership utilized a cost-effective approach to publicizing the community workshops, resulting in broad awareness and substantial attendance at the events. Some of the methods included:

Newspaper and Radio Advertising

Project staff worked with local agency representatives to identify local newspaper and radio stations popular with the target audience. Feedback from attendees indicated that these low-cost outreach methods successfully attracted people to the workshops.

Direct Mail and E-Mail

Project staff mailed meeting announcements to every household in the Benton area from a list of nearly 400 addresses provided by Mono County Staff. The County also utilized the Regional Planning Advisory Committee (RPAC) listserve. Electronic meeting announcements were sent to nearly 150 people on an active emailing list.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

As part of the overall outreach process, project team members conducted a series of interviews with area stakeholders to elicit feedback on the issues as well as the process of public engagement. The interviews were conducted in person or by phone during October 2007. The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into current and future issues facing Benton and to seek advice about how to successfully engage the community in the process. Joan Chaplick from MIG conducted the interviews, accompanied by representatives from the County or Caltrans.

Stakeholder Outreach: Benton-Paiute Tribe

At the outset of the Benton Community Visioning process, coordination with and inclusion of the Benton-Paiute Tribe was a high priority. At the time of the interviews, results of a tribal election were unresolved, a fact that created some challenges to working with Benton-Paiute on a tribal leadership level. The project team instead approached the tribe in a less formal manner, i.e., as a key landowner and business owner. Interviewers met with a tribal administrator to determine the most effective way to notify tribal



members and involve members and decision makers in the process. These interviews also allowed the team to gain insights into the preferred methods for tribal outreach. Individuals identifying themselves as tribal members attended the workshops and shared opinions about current and proposed opportunities.

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOPS

The Benton Community Vision Partnership held a series of three public workshops in February, June and August that attracted 95 Benton residents. Each of the three workshops employed specific methods to solicit feedback and engage participants effectively, based on the goals of the meeting.





February 2008: Creating a Vision

The February meeting served as the formal start of the visioning process. It provided participants an opportunity to identify the qualities they wanted retained in their community. Participants also shared their issues and concerns and discussed potential opportunities. This information was used to shape a draft Vision Statement for the community and provided the basis for a set of draft Guiding Principles that were presented in August.

At the start of the meeting, Caltrans and Mono County staff made brief presentations on their respective planning processes and explained how the results of the visioning process would be utilized in these efforts. Joan Chaplick of MIG made a presentation on best practices in rural planning.

Following her introductory comments, Ms. Chaplick opened up the large group discussion, prompting responses with a series of questions on topics such as development, transportation, water infrastructure and recreation. Meeting staff recorded individual comments on a large wallgraphic at the front of the room. This method allowed participants to see that their comments had been noted and served as a useful tool to guide the conversation as well as serving as a formal record following the meeting.

Results

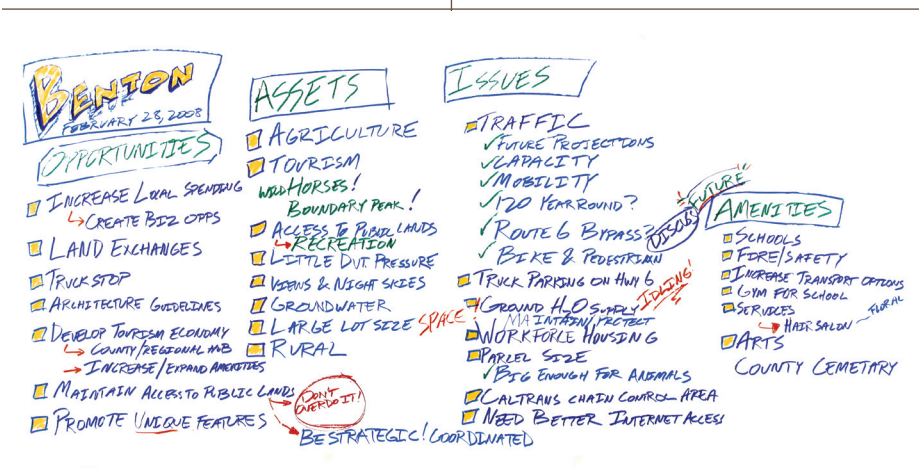
The large group discussion identified the following issues:

Transportation

Residents expressed concern about safety on the highways, including unsafe driving speeds and dangerous conditions related to truck parking and chain control along Highway 6. However, a majority of participants were concerned about a potential rerouting of the highway to bypass Benton. They supported the idea of keeping SR 120 open year-round. Finally, residents expressed a desire for improvements to the bicycle and pedestrian network in the area.

Water Supply and Infrastructure

Residents repeatedly emphasized that



any future development must be compatible with existing water supply, and that maintenance and preservation of the existing water supply is strongly valued. Furthermore, meeting attendees felt strongly that future growth should be sensitive to the long-term water supply for the area.

Workforce Housing

Many Benton residents work outside of Benton in either Bishop or Mammoth. Meeting attendees expressed a desire to develop housing for people who will live and work in the Benton area. There was a strong desire to develop housing for permanent residents, rather than second homes.

Recreation Access

Meeting attendees expressed a strong desire to maintain strategic access to surrounding public open space.

Economic Development

Participants mentioned existing parcel sizes as a limiting factor to future development. Many appeared open to reviewing parcel sizes if it would help increase opportunities for development aligned with the community's vision and quality of life. Others communicated a preference for large lots where they can raise and keep animals, especially outside the core community area.

June 2008: Discussing Future Growth

The June meeting utilized a map-based exercise (represented in **Figure 6**) to solicit residents' attitudes towards growth and site-specific preferences for potential growth, circulation improvements and access to recreation.

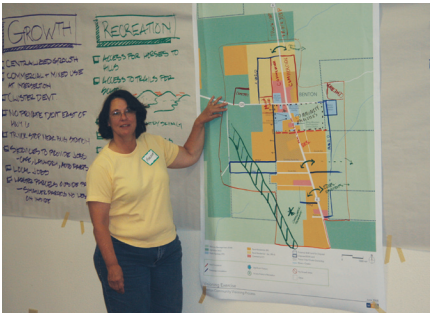
Participants worked in small groups to discuss issues related to recreation, growth and circulation. Facilitators led participants in small group discussions about these issues, recording comments on the maps when applicable and also on flip charts. Following the small group exercise, designated "reporters" from each group shared the results of their discussion with the large group. This format allowed for all attendees to provide input and to learn and reflect on the discussion points presented by other groups. The small group reports were recorded on wallgraphic paper, similar to those used at the February session.

Results

The results of the June land use exercise are depicted in Figures 6, 7 and 8 on pages 37-39.

The items on the maps are suggestions and do not imply a commitment to implementation by any local agency. Implementation of improve-





ments may require further technical analysis and consideration.

The Community-Identified Recreation Opportunities map (**Figure 7**) represents existing recreation access points identified by residents and those BLM lands that should be retained as recreational lands.

A recurring theme expressed throughout the stakeholder interviews and first Community Visioning meeting was the need to protect strategic access to existing public lands and recreational opportunities such as hiking and horseback riding. In June, residents identified four specific access points and two BLM parcels that should be maintained for recreational uses. Strategies to support these activities were identified under Guiding Principles A, B and D.

The Community-Identified Circulation Opportunities map (**Figure 8**) represents resident suggestions about preferred locations for local circulation improvements.

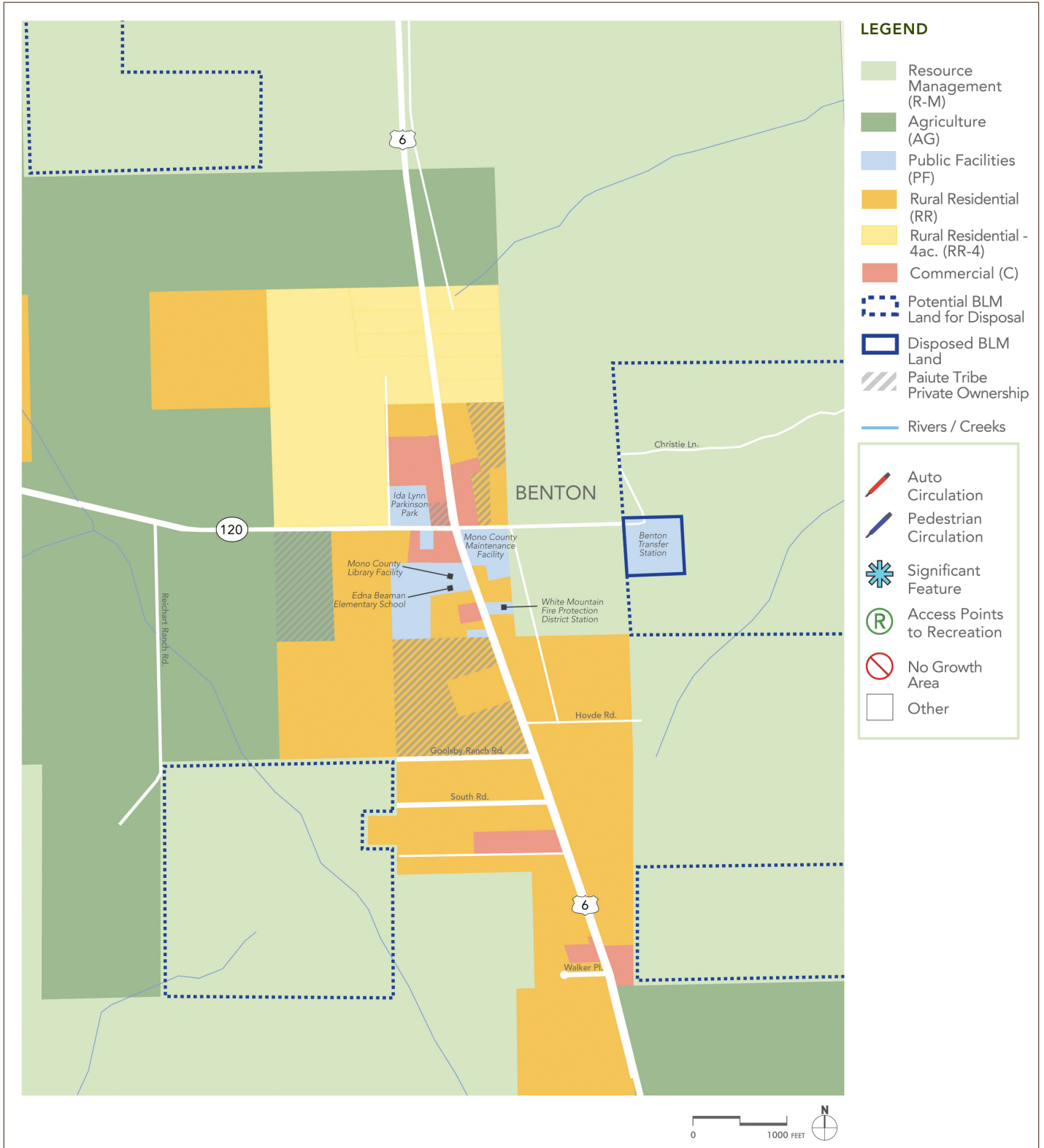
Local road connections were primarily identified to the west of US 6 and south of SR 120 and those roads connecting existing residential areas to community facilities such as the school and community center. The

strategies accompanying guiding principle E (“Develop a Safe and Efficient Transportation Network”), were identified based on resident input generated during this exercise and throughout the entire community visioning process.

The Community-Identified Land Use Opportunities map (**Figure 9**) represents general preferences for locations and types of improvements. Development of any of the identified improvements would require a more in-depth planning process.

Specific types of opportunities and locations suggested by residents are identified on this map and reflected in strategies developed to support guiding principles A (“Protect and Maintain Benton’s District Character”), C (“Support Community Services”) and F (“Encourage a Sound and Stable Economy”). A community welcome center was suggested as an opportunity to attract visitors, as was a potential campground/RV park on BLM property. A truck stop to the north of town was identified as an economic development opportunity, but community sentiment was mixed on this type of development. Cemetery location ideas were suggested and are located on the map. Opportunities

FIGURE 6: VISIONING EXERCISE





identified in Figure 8 are representative of a need. The actual location of any of these land uses or amenities in the future will require further planning review.

August 2008: Guiding Principles

Following the February and June meetings, the partnership returned in August to present a series of Community Vision and Guiding Principles for consideration and review. The materials presented met with a positive response and were accepted by the community with minor edits.

To expedite the feedback process on the principles, facilitators provided participants with a set of red, yellow and green cards. As participants reviewed each Guiding Principle and Strategy, they indicated their level of agreement by raising a card. A green card indicated full agreement; a red card indicated disagreement and a yellow card indicated either a need for clarification or possible support for the principle with modifications. This technique allowed facilitators to move quickly through all the guiding principles and strategies.

Results

Overall, participants supported 29 statements without modifications,

and suggested changes to 13 strategies. One additional strategy was suggested and one strategy was removed completely. The final Guiding Principles and Strategies are listed in Section Three.

Comment Cards

Facilitators provided comment cards to all meeting attendees. These cards offered an additional opportunity for attendees to give their input and were an especially useful tool for soliciting feedback from those attendees who are uncomfortable with public speaking. Comment cards were collected and reviewed following every meeting. A return mailing address was also provided on the comment cards and attendees were given one week to mail back their comments. Facilitators also encouraged attendees to distribute comment cards to those not in attendance to solicit their written input and feedback on key questions and strategic directions.

OTHER OUTCOMES

In addition to the development of a Community Vision Statement and Guiding Principles and Strategies, the Benton Community Visioning Process can be considered a success due to the following outcomes:

Sustained Community Engagement

Over 100 Benton residents of all ages participated in the Benton Community Visioning process. The sustained level of community interest and participation has encouraged local agency staff to continue with ongoing community involvement in local planning efforts.

Increased Agency Coordination

Increased coordination and collaboration between local agency representatives at Caltrans, Mono County and the BLM is another successful outcome of the Benton Community Visioning Process.

NEXT STEPS

The documented community preferences related to land use, circulation and access to recreation embodied in the Community Vision Statement and Guiding Principles and Strategies will be included in a variety of agency planning documents, including:

- Mono County General Plan Update and Benton Area Plan
- US 6 and SR 120 Transportation Concept Report updates
- Regional Transportation Plan
- County Environmental Assessment Report

- Regional Blueprint Planning Efforts

CONCLUSION

The development pattern in Benton is inextricably linked to a handful of land-owning agencies, including the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) that manage the majority of acreage surrounding the community, as well as the Benton Paiute tribe that manages reservation and private lands in trust. These ownership patterns present both a challenge and an opportunity to the community. While the lands are currently managed as open space, a change in land management strategy by any these parties could drastically alter the landscape.

Input generated through the Benton Community Visioning process indicates that while Benton residents are open to some form of growth, they prefer concentrated growth that conserves resources and celebrates Benton's unique history and identity.

In contrast to these desires, current land use planning designations allow for a very different evolution of growth. If Benton were to become built out under current Land Use Des-



ignations as described in the Mono County General Plan Land Use Element, the area could accommodate as many as 3,874 dwelling units and potentially over 9,000 residents.

Therefore, while current land use designations do support the community's ability to determine their destiny as a small, rural community, they do not embody the vision of the Benton community as expressed in the meetings; rather, they have the potential to encourage a style and location of development that is in stark contrast to the desires of the community.

While residents were not opposed to an increased population in the future, they clearly expressed a desire for concentrated, resource-sensitive development as described by the Vision, Statement and Guiding Principles and Strategies.

Looking to the future, the Community Vision Statement and Guiding Principles will serve as useful tools for community members and decision-makers alike. The continued and committed involvement of local citizens and agency representatives will ensure that the ideas expressed in this document come to pass.

The ideas articulated through the community visioning process give residents and decision-makers a greater range of tools to help maintain Benton's most desirable qualities while meeting the needs of current and future residents.

FIGURE 7: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES

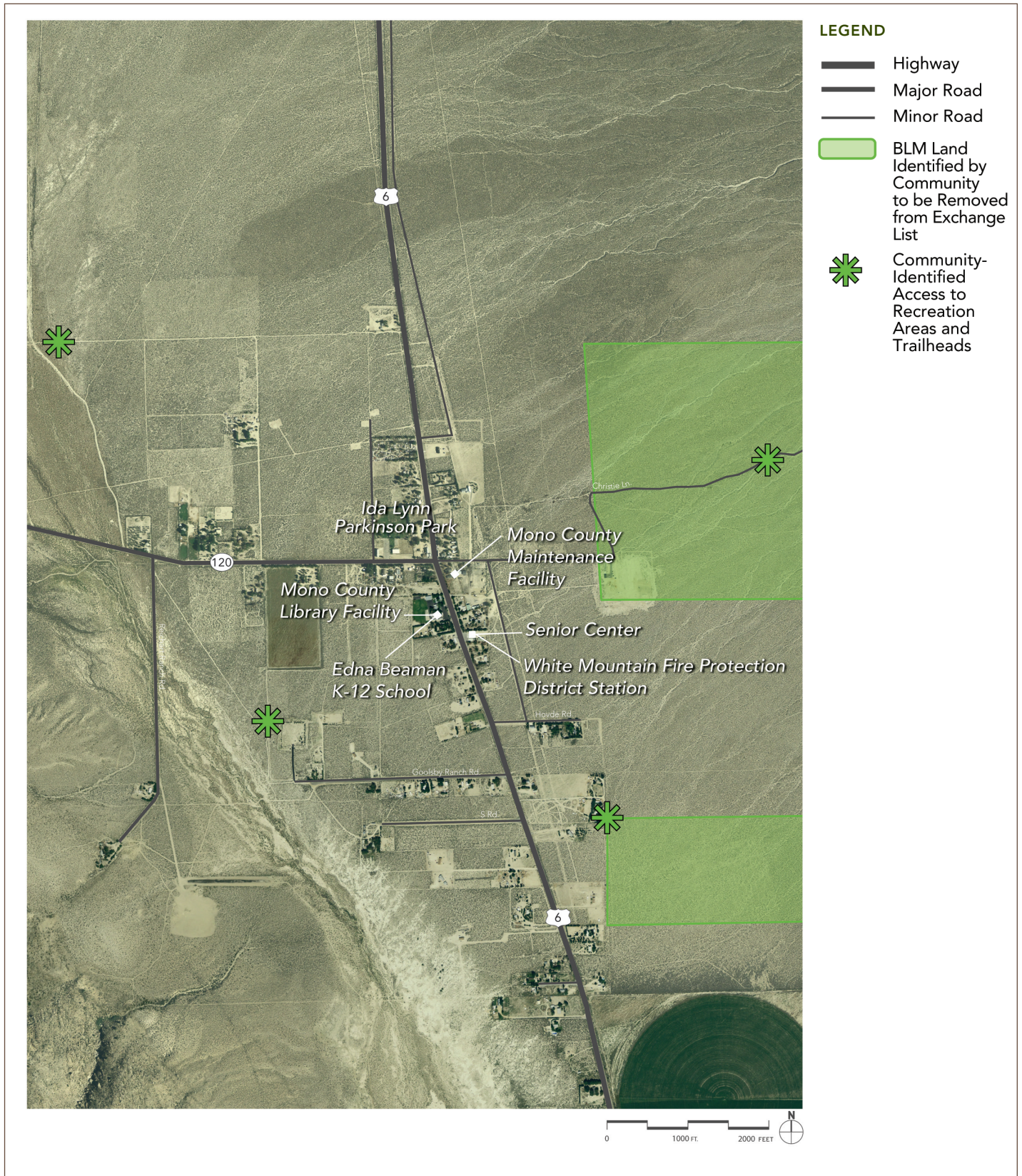


FIGURE 8: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED CIRCULATION OPPORTUNITIES

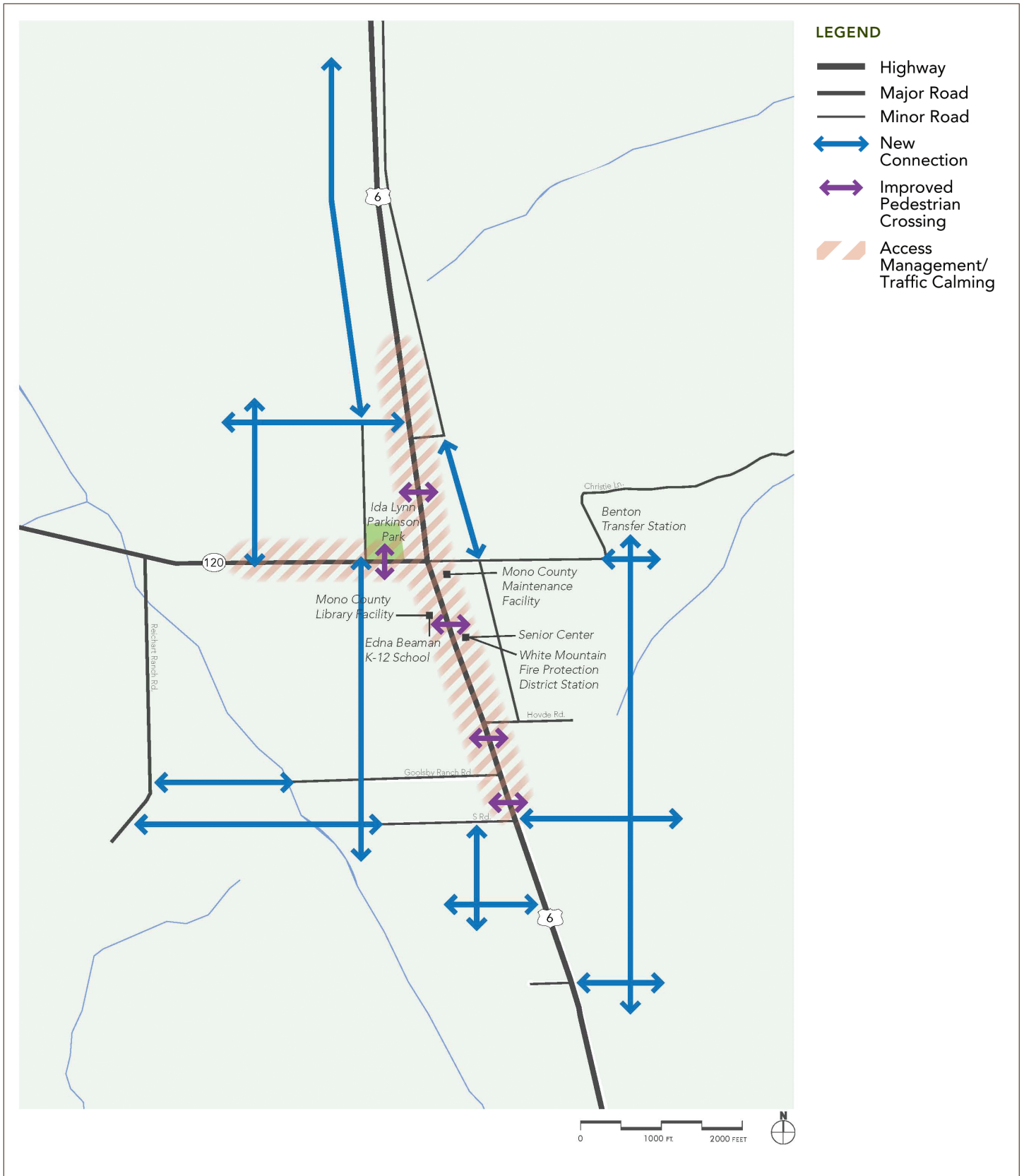


FIGURE 9: COMMUNITY-IDENTIFIED LAND USE OPPORTUNITIES

