

Community Value Assessment

A Guide for Communities and Partners

A community may have strong trails, rivers, parks, scenic corridors, or public lands. It may also be seeing more visitors without seeing measurable local value in return.

The outdoor economy is an ecosystem of connections which can be best seen when you think about the journey of an outdoor recreationalist moving from the asset, into town, and into businesses. Outdoor recreation visitors need to be able to discover, plan, arrive, navigate, and understand what to expect. After they recreate, outdoor assets need to connect to nearby towns, districts, businesses, and services. The in-town environment should be inviting, providing a place for residents to enjoy and encouraging visitors to linger and drive local spending. Businesses, current and future, are prepared to serve outdoor visitors and welcoming to all. And under every stop, stewardship systems are intentionally designed to protect the assets and community conditions that make the experience valuable.



Community value is what a place keeps and builds for itself. That's why TIS Impact Services created the Community Value Assessment. It is designed to help communities look at the outdoor economy as a connected system and identify where outdoor recreation is already creating value, where value may be leaking, and which next steps may be worth focusing on first.

What the assessment helps you understand

Are the right conditions in place to turn outdoor recreation use into lasting community value?

Many communities are investing in outdoor recreation because they see its potential to support economic development, quality of life, downtown activity, visitor spending, business growth, and long-term resilience.

But the benefits are not guaranteed.

This assessment looks beyond whether a community has outdoor recreation assets. It examines whether those assets are connected to the systems that help create community benefit. It helps identify:

01 Where outdoor recreation is already supporting local value

02 Where visitors may be using assets without connecting to town

03 Where infrastructure, information, or wayfinding may be limiting the experience

04 Where local businesses and partners may be missing opportunity

05 Where stewardship, coordination, or monitoring may need to strengthen

06 Emerging blind spots and which gaps may deserve attention first

TIS IMPACT SERVICES

Building Outdoor & Visitor Economies

Grounded in outdoor economy experience

The Community Value Assessment is grounded in TIS's applied work with outdoor recreation corridors, rural towns, resort destinations, and gateway communities. It draws from nearly 20 years of developing standards-based assessments and destination planning frameworks, including the internationally recognized IDEAL Destination Standard and Certification Program, the Actively Green Business Certification Program in Vail, Colorado, and the Outdoor NC Trail Town Stewardship Program hosted by Visit North Carolina.

The through-line is simple and practical: TIS has spent decades helping businesses and destinations understand how visitor activity results in local benefit.

Who should complete the assessment

The assessment is designed for communities and partners looking to grow their outdoor economy.

It may be completed by:

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| – Local government staff | – Economic development partners |
| – Outdoor recreation offices | – Tourism offices |
| – Chambers of commerce | – Main Street programs |
| – Trail and conservation partners | |

The assessment does not require extensive experience with outdoor recreation or economic development. However, the best results will come from someone who understands how the two intersect.

What the assessment examines

The Community Value Assessment is organized around an outdoor recreation visitor's journey from activity to spending. It looks at whether that journey has the connections, information, infrastructure, businesses, public spaces, and stewardship capacity to capture value locally.

Community value priorities

At the beginning of the assessment, respondents identify the community values that matter most in their local context. These priorities help TIS interpret the results. The gap that matters most for one community may not be the highest priority for another. The assessment includes six community value priorities.

Increase Economic Capture

Outdoor recreation strengthens the local economy by supporting businesses, jobs, entrepreneurship, investment, workforce opportunity, and year-round economic resilience.

Strengthen Resident Benefit

Outdoor recreation improves quality of life for residents by supporting access, livability, local pride, public spaces, health, and community connection.

Improve Visitor Experience

Outdoor recreation supports a better visitor experience by making it easier for people to plan, arrive, navigate, participate responsibly, and connect with the community.

Improve Asset Stewardship

Outdoor recreation assets are cared for, maintained, protected, and supported through responsible use, partner coordination, and long-term stewardship practices.

Strengthen Durability of Place

The community is better prepared to handle growth, seasonal pressure, climate impacts, infrastructure strain, and changing visitor patterns without losing the qualities that make the place valuable.

Strengthen Local Capacity

The community has the partnerships, leadership, information, funding, and implementation structure needed to move from ideas to action.

The connections where community value is won or lost

The link between outdoor assets and community value is not automatic. Community value is won or lost in *the connections between* an outdoor asset and the community around it.

The assessment focuses on the four areas where those connections live, each requiring intention and willingness to improve over time.

Trail-to-Town Connections

This area examines: online trip planning, wayfinding, gateway identity, dispersing visitors, asset-to-town connections, and linked trails and routes.

Why it matters: visitors may use trails, waterways, and public lands without ever visiting town. Stronger connections turn that outdoor activity into local spending and community benefit.

In-Town Infrastructure

This area examines: parking and arrival, walkability, gathering spaces, visitor comfort, streets and public spaces, and outdoor-town character.

Why it matters: a town that is hard to move through may lose spending even when the outdoor draw is strong. Intentional placemaking lets the community receive visitors in ways that benefit residents and businesses.

Economic Drivers

This area examines: local business mix, visitor readiness, partner alliances, local business development, events and competitions, and programming for residents.

Why it matters: recreation activity can grow without local spending growing with it. Aligning businesses, partners, and programming keeps that revenue in the community.

Destination Stewardship

This area examines: partner mapping, land-manager coordination, community-involved planning, measuring visitor and economic impact, staffing and funding, and promoting responsible use.

Why it matters: growth and seasonal pressure can erode the assets that made recreation valuable. Stewardship protects that value and keeps the community able to respond.

How the assessment works

The Community Value Assessment is a self-administered, TIS-interpreted assessment. The process includes five steps.

Step 1: Complete the assessment form. The respondent answers community context questions, selects community value priorities, and rates current conditions.

Step 2: TIS reviews the responses. TIS reviews the full response set to identify patterns, strengths, gaps, and priority signals.

Step 3: TIS prepares a findings summary. TIS prepares a concise findings summary that explains what the responses may suggest for the community and where you can focus your attention.

Step 4: Schedule a review call. TIS invites respondents to schedule a 30-minute review call to go over the assessment results.

Step 5: Discuss findings and next steps. The call is used to review the findings, compare them against local experience, and discuss possible next steps.

How to answer the questions

- The assessment is designed to take approximately 15 minutes.
- Respondents select their top three community value priorities and list their top three outdoor assets.
- Respondents rate current conditions, not future plans or aspirations.
- When answering, think about what a first-time visitor, local business, resident, or partner would actually experience today.
- If something exists on paper but is difficult to find, use, understand, or act on, the score should reflect that.
- The assessment uses a 1 to 5 scale. Start at 1 and move up. Stop at the first level you cannot honestly claim.
- A perfect score is not the goal. Honest answers are more useful than optimistic answers. The goal is to understand how the system is working now.

What you receive

After the assessment is submitted, TIS reviews the responses and prepares a concise findings summary.

Most communities can already point to their own gaps. The most useful finding is often the one you were not watching: the gap quietly costing value without your attention. The value is in knowing what to act on first, read against the priorities you chose.

There are two parts to the findings summary report to help the community understand what matters most next.

Part 1 · by email, within one week

- Where your core foundations stand
- Priority findings organized by connected themes
- Recommended first step
- Invitation to schedule a 30-minute review call

Part 2 · after the review call

- Community value priority weighting
- Key strengths and gaps for all 24 indicators
- Suggested next steps and opportunities

The assessment, the findings summary, and the review call are free, with no obligation. Deeper diagnostic, planning, and implementation support are available as paid engagements if a community chooses to go further.

What the assessment is not

The Community Value Assessment is a structured self-assessment, read against TIS's outdoor economy standard. It is not an economic measurement, and it does not claim to be one. Its job is to help the people who know a community best see the system clearly, and to show where closer measurement is worth doing.

- It is not an audit.
- It is not a pass-fail grade.
- It is not a grant ranking tool.
- It is not a complete destination plan.
- It is not a replacement for community engagement, site design, engineering, land manager coordination, accessibility review, or detailed visitor use planning.
- It does not assess housing, workforce, or visitor capacity limits; those pressures are real, and they deserve deeper study than a self-assessment can honestly provide.
- It does not measure the ecological condition of your assets; that work belongs to land managers and the scientists who support them. The assessment scores how well your community coordinates with it.
- It does not assume that every community needs the same solution.

Instead, the assessment is a structured starting point. It helps identify where outdoor recreation is already contributing to community value and where focused action may make the biggest difference.

Common questions

Is this about attracting more tourists?

No. The assessment considers any outdoor recreationalist a visitor, no matter if they live locally or 500 miles away, and the question is whether their activity is becoming value your community keeps. Community value is the point, not visitor counts. A downtown worth lingering in, businesses ready to serve, assets that are cared for, also make a community a better place to live. Build for the residents and the visitors follow.

Is this for communities just getting started, or for established destinations?

Both, and the assessment reads differently for each. A community growing its outdoor economy will see what to put in place first, and in what order. An established destination managing high visitation will see which systems are worth maturing and where pressure is building on the things that made the place work. Strong scores are not a finished story; they usually point toward deeper destination stewardship, and that is a conversation worth having.

Who sees my responses?

Your responses go to TIS and are used to prepare your findings summary and review call. They are never published, shared with other communities, or attributed to your community. In sponsored cohort rounds, sponsors receive the patterns across the group, and may see individual community's responses.

What if I am not sure how to score a question?

Answer from your working knowledge of the place. You do not need reports or data in front of you, and a note under each question tells you what to consider. If something exists on paper but is hard to find, use, or act on, score what people actually experience today.

What if the outdoor economy work spans several organizations?

Answer for one community, from the seat you know best. If you would rather answer as a group, gather the people who touch the outdoor economy and complete it together as one submission.

For Partners and Sponsors

Results are comparable across communities by design. State offices, regional organizations, and funders can sponsor a cohort round, in which a group of communities completes the assessment and the sponsor receives an aggregate readout of the patterns and priorities across the group. Contact us to discuss a cohort.

If you manage public lands near a gateway or trail town, the assessment is a resource you can hand to community partners asking how to grow their outdoor economy responsibly. Coordination with land managers is built into what it measures.

Getting Started

The Community Value Assessment takes about 15-20 minutes. No preparation is required. You answer for current conditions as they are today, not future plans.

Start the online assessment [HERE](#).

Once you submit, TIS reviews your responses and sends a findings summary within a week, followed by an invitation to a 30-minute review call to talk through what matters most next.

If you would rather complete it with your team, or have questions before you begin, reach out:

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