

EAST RANGE JOINT POWERS BOARD (ERJPB) BUSINESS RETENTION AND ATTRACTION REPORT

PREPARED FOR THE EAST RANGE JOINT POWERS BOARD

by

The Northspan Group, Inc.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Northspan Group, Inc. completed 28 business visits over the course of six months on behalf of the East Range Joint Powers Board (ERJPB). The visits sought an overview of conditions for businesses on the East Range and looked to provide recommendations on how the Board can best assist them. While not a comprehensive overview, the visits provided a valuable cross-section of the East Range business community and strengthened relationships between ERJPB staff and area businesses.

The report reaches the following conclusions about East Range businesses:

- While many of the businesses are well-established, they also had high rates of innovation and try to update their offerings to reflect changing technology and new economic opportunities.
- East Range businesses face a cyclical challenge of a lack of workforce, lack of jobs, and lack of amenities that come with concentrations of people and jobs.
- Firms in construction, mining, manufacturing, and finance seek to break this cycle by exporting new products to create jobs and wealth.
- Firms in the hospitality and other tourism-related sectors also see growth opportunities based on the region's recreation assets but are hampered by weak networks for cooperation and workforce challenges.
- Small-town feel, customer loyalty, and access to recreation opportunities keep East Range business owners feeling positive about their communities.
- Despite the economic challenges of recent decades, owners and managers tended to be upbeat about their communities' futures. They are deeply loyal to the East Range and want to keep their operations here and see businesses thrive.
- The East Range Joint Powers Board can help improve the business climate on the East Range by providing direct or indirect financial assistance, better connecting businesses in the same sectors, and tackling many of the interwoven quality of life issues that can make the East Range a desirable place to live and do business.

We make five recommendations based on the feedback we compiled:

1. Put the ERJPB loan fund back to work
2. Explore a unified business presence
3. Explore ways to support business marketing efforts
4. Develop an incubator space for lease
5. Enhance interconnectedness of tourism efforts
6. Continue East Range Broadband Advocacy Efforts

East Range businesses face challenging dynamics, but community members are committed to the East Range and there are opportunities for growth in diverse sectors of the economy.

OF EAST RANGE BUSINESSES:

- 82%** REPORT INCREASING OR STABLE REVENUES
- 46%** HAVE TROUBLE FINDING NEW EMPLOYEES
- 39%** REACH MARKETS BEYOND THE EAST RANGE
- 46%** CALL THE LOCAL BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR FOR SUCCESS
- 82%** HAVE PLANS FOR NEW INVESTMENT
- 68%** ARE OWNED OR MANAGED BY EAST RANGE NATIVES WHO MOVED AWAY AND CAME BACK

INTRODUCTION

East Range Joint Powers Board staff consultants from The Northspan Group, Inc. completed 28 visits with East Range businesses over six months. These visits aimed to gauge businesses’ current operations, perceptions of the business climate and broader community conditions, and the state of broadband on the East Range. These visits targeted a broad range of East Range businesses and were arranged with support from city and town mayors, clerks, and administrators. Funding from the Blandin Foundation’s Blandin Broadband Community program helped support the visits, and led to the inclusion of a broadband survey, which went beyond Northspan’s general business visit questions.

BUSINESS OPERATIONS

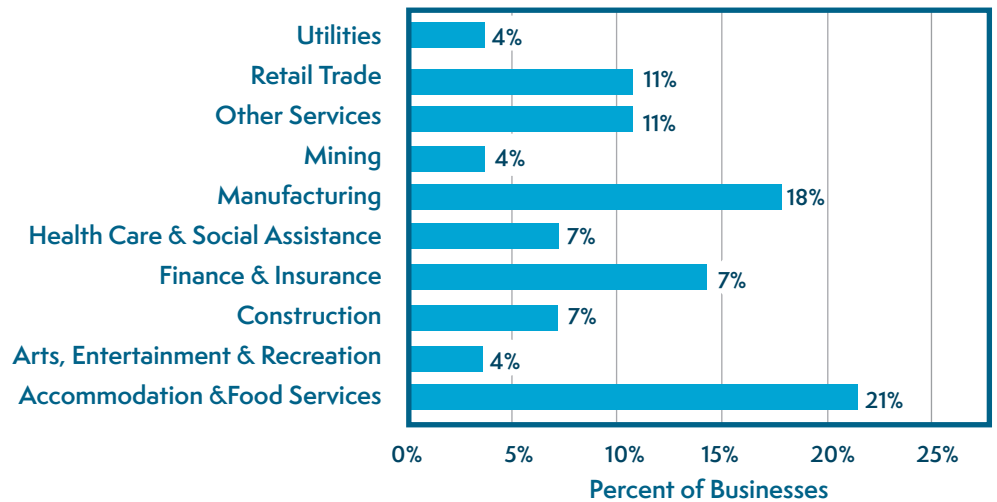
The first set of questions in the visits focused on general business operations. These questions have been adapted from the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce’s Grow Minnesota! program and results were entered in its anonymous database.

GENERAL BUSINESS CHARACTERISTICS

The surveyed businesses come from a wide industry mix, including all ten major private sector classifications. The businesses included in this report span the full spectrum of the East Range economy and provide a strong cross-section of the community.

The surveyed businesses also come in many different sizes. While 12 of the 28 have five or fewer employees, the sample included three with 50 or more employees. Predictably, the largest employers were in healthcare, manufacturing, mining, and accommodations, while retail, restaurants, and professional services were among the smallest.

BUSINESS INDUSTRY



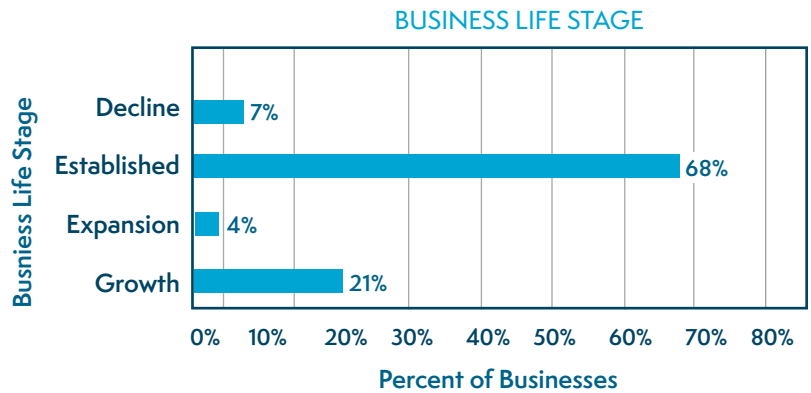
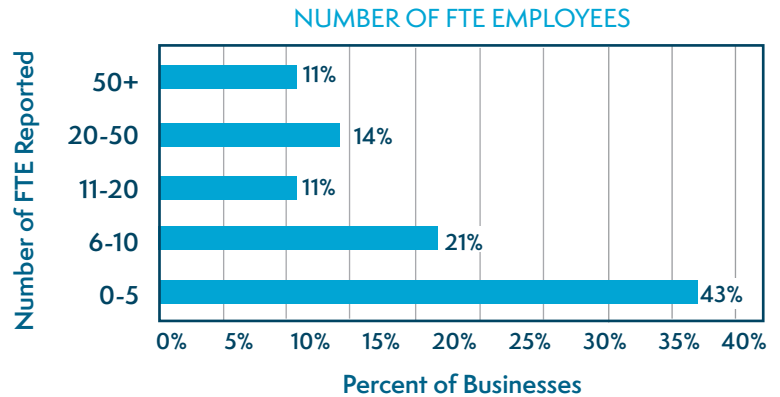
BUSINESS OPERATIONS, CONT.

BUSINESS OWNER/MANAGER CHARACTERISTICS

In total, the ERJPB interviewed 34 business owners or managers. Most live and work on the East Range, though several commute from more locations as distant as Hibbing, Grand Rapids, and Duluth. At three businesses (totaling four people interviewed), ERJPB staff talked with management of larger companies who were not based on the East Range. At least 19 of the business owners grew up on the East Range and moved away for some time before returning home to operate their business, which demonstrates the ability of the East Range to bring people home to their roots and their propensity to apply knowledge gained elsewhere on the East Range. This high degree of loyalty suggests other past residents could be encouraged to return for the right opportunity.

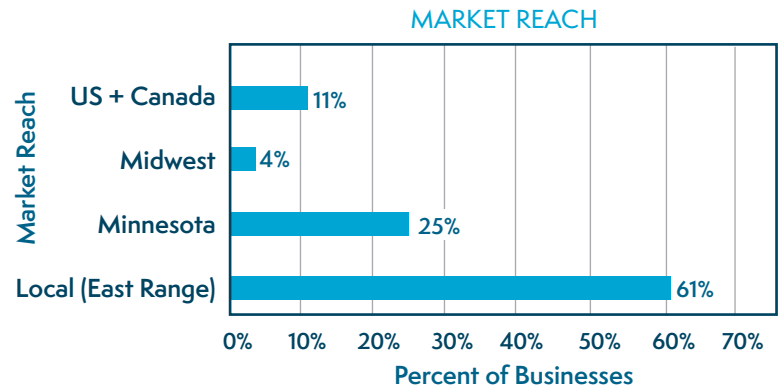
BUSINESS LIFE STAGE

Most East Range businesses included in the sample are long-established. The median age of the businesses is 20 years, though the sample included one that formed as early as 1908 and one that opened in 2017. Many of the financial institutions and manufacturers have been in operation for decades, while retail operations and restaurants tended to be younger. Seven saw themselves in a growth or expansion phase, and only two self-identified as being in decline. Growing and expanding companies included several in high-employment mining and manufacturing fields, though it also included several enterprising entrepreneurs who are thinking creatively about how to grow their business. The two businesses in decline include a facility for a regional company whose industry is undergoing substantial structural changes and a sole proprietorship whose owner is approaching retirement age and voluntarily cutting back on his time, though his industry also faces substantial headwinds.



MARKET REACH

While most surveyed businesses primarily serve East Range customers, 39% serve populations beyond the immediate area. Three reported that they currently export or will export when fully operational. This reach is unusually wide for a group of small communities and shows both how products made on the East Range can reach global markets and reflect the area’s status as a destination for visitors from beyond the area.

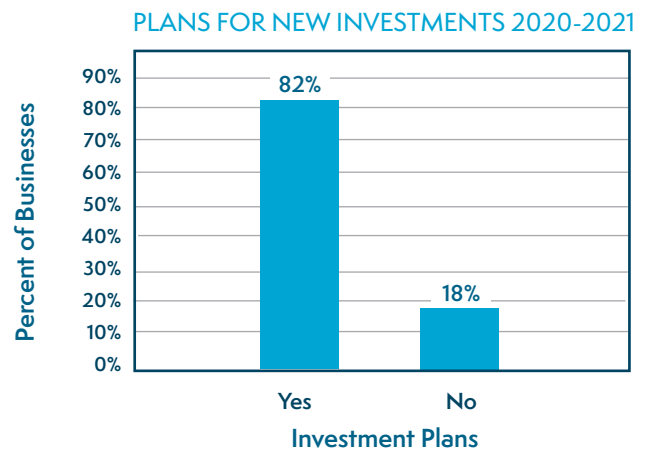


CURRENT FACILITIES

Twenty-five of the 28 businesses own their own facility, and two of the three renters lease their space from a public entity. This leaves just one East Range business renting private space and shows the near-total lack of available spaces for lease in the area. The East Range’s relatively affordable commercial real estate makes building ownership a more common path for even small businesses, though there may be room for additional rental space in the market, particularly to assist start-up businesses or those that may not be interested in the type of large-scale remodeling project that may be necessary to make an existing storefront viable for their businesses.

INVESTMENT PLANS

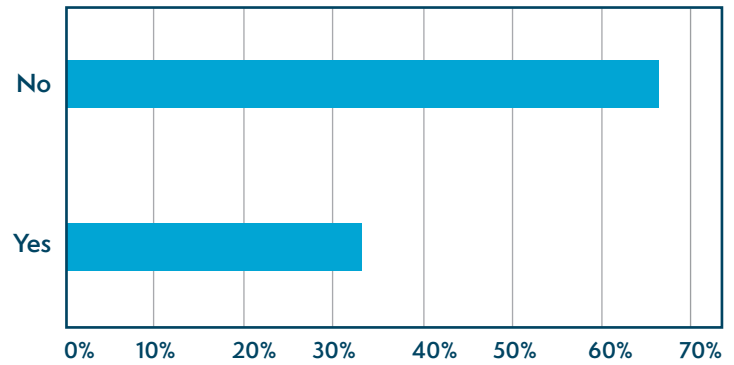
Twenty-three of 28 East Range businesses are planning significant investments in the next year, including several that will make numerous types of investments. Building renovations and expansions were foremost on most businesses’ minds, and while many of these changes involved gradual retrofitting of existing facilities or cosmetic changes, others sought more elaborate interior updates. Nine businesses, including most manufacturers, anticipate major equipment purchases that will enhance their operations.



NEW PRODUCTS OR SERVICES

Despite the relative stability of the East Range businesses, they are adapting to change and finding ways to be innovative. Seventeen introduced new products or offerings over the past year, and 17 also indicated an interest in adding new products in the next year. For many businesses, these changes involved new technology or adaptations to it; for example, financial institutions are streamlining online banking and healthcare-related businesses are adapting to innovations in telehealth. Retailers, particularly those that compete with larger chains, seek out niche products that their competitors may not offer, and several are adapting to the preferences of visitors to the region by offering services such as bike rentals or expanded lodging space to support retreats.

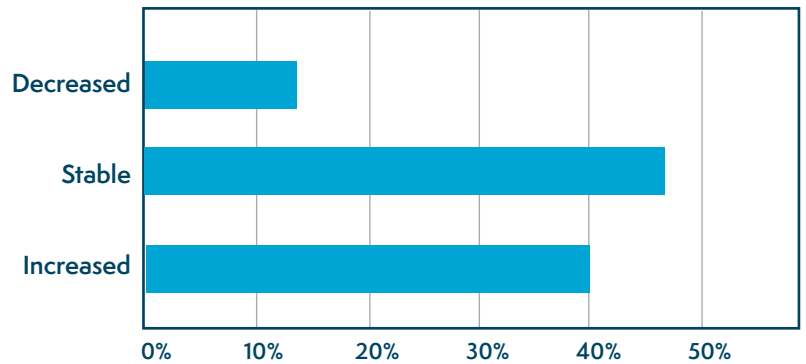
PLANS TO OFFER NEW PRODUCTS



REVENUE TRENDS

East Range businesses have largely enjoyed stable or positive revenue trends over the past year and usually expressed optimism for the future. Of the five businesses that registered a decrease, four are downtown retail-type businesses that cited a variety of reasons, often unique to each business or industry, for their difficulties. The fifth business with a decrease was one with a non-local owner whose local manager believed it suffered from neglect from the owner.

CHANGE IN REVENUE IN PAST YEAR



MAJOR EXPENSES

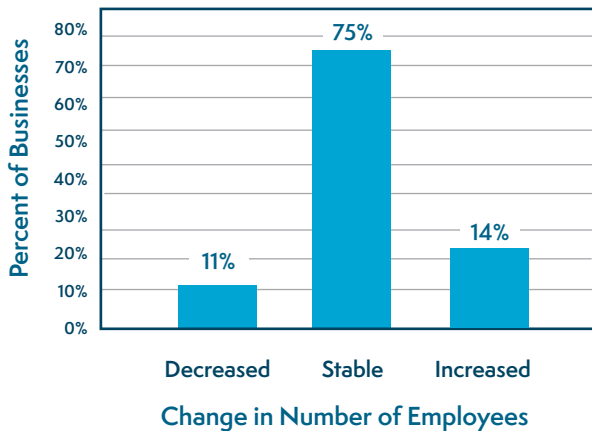
Nearly all businesses reported stable expenses, with the only prominent exception being a business that aims to dramatically scale up its operations in the near term. Healthcare, wages, and costs of supplies or inputs were the most common drivers of increased expenses. Four businesses cited tariffs as a concern that either affected them or other businesses in their supply chain directly. Most businesses in Biwabik expressed concern over rising property taxes, though tax frustration was relatively muted in the other East Range communities. A handful of businesses also reported they were raising their wages in order to be more competitive in the local labor market.

BUSINESS OPERATIONS, CONT.

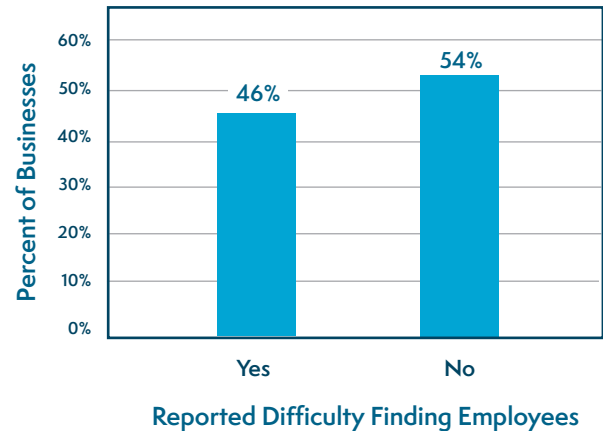
WORKFORCE

Workforce is a considerable challenge for a substantial number of East Range businesses, with nearly half of those interviewed reporting difficulties finding workers. Those who did not face issues, with a handful of exceptions, tended to be small businesses with no need to hire regularly. Those in need of workers universally cited a lack of available workforce as their greatest challenge, whether they were seeking to fill highly skilled technical positions or entry-level jobs. Several interviewees bemoaned a poorer work ethic among younger generations and spoke of drug issues in the community. A simple lack of available bodies, however, was the biggest recurring issue. "I can't even get the druggies to apply," lamented one manager in the hospitality industry, which was perhaps the worst afflicted. Follow-through from applicants was sometimes poor, with some managers speculating applicants were simply complying with requirements to receive benefits and not serious about working the job.

CHANGE IN NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES 2019-2020



DIFFICULTY FINDING NEW EMPLOYEES



Large businesses in industries with higher wages were the least likely to report issues, though they still faced occasional challenges for specialized positions. Several businesses reported strong relationships with the local high school and community colleges that helped them to fill their more pressing gaps. Apprenticeships and high school or college internships also helped introduce prospective employees to careers in construction, manufacturing, and healthcare.

COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

The second set of questions invited interviewees to share their broader perceptions of the East Range and the communities in which they work and live.

COMMUNITY POSITIVES

Community Positives	Mentions
Small-Town Feel and Lifestyle	24
Community Support for Business	16
Outdoor Recreation	8
Collaborative Local Politics	4



FACTORS MOST IMPORTANT TO BUSINESS SUCCESS

Interviewees cited a range of factors as critical to their business success. The overall business environment was foremost among these considerations, though quality of life factors such as housing, cost of living, and natural environment also emerged prominently. Transportation challenges were a real issue for some businesses, both in terms of their own logistics networks and for businesses that served the elderly, along with familiar issues such as broadband, child care, and education. Environmental regulations, predictably, were problematic for businesses within mining supply chains.

Factors Important to Business Success	Mentions
Business Environment	13
Quality of Life	8
Broadband	5
Transportation	5
Child Care	4
Environmental Regulations	4
Taxes	3
Insurance Costs	3
Quality City Services	3
K-12 Education	2



THREATS

A lack of jobs on the East Range emerged as the greatest threat in the eyes of a plurality of interviewees; some added qualifiers calling for living-wage jobs. A general lack of amenities also received frequent mention, as did challenges with drugs in the communities. Several respondents, particularly those in the healthcare sector, were concerned about the aging population on the East Range and its implications for both the workforce and the community’s ability to care for them. Housing and environmental activism also received several mentions, and other well-known community issues such as a lack of childcare, broadband, and a mining-dependent economy also appeared.

The Greatest Threat	Mentions
Lack of Jobs/Economic Opportunity	8
Lack of Amenities	6
Drugs	5
Aging Population/Caring for the Elderly	4
Housing	3
Environmental Activities	3

PERCEPTIONS OF ERJPB

When asked about their perceptions of the ERJPB, few businesses expressed much familiarity with the group or its mission. Several had worked with the ERJPB in the past, most often through the ERJPB loan fund, and several through assistance from ERJPB staff in helping to secure funding from other sources such as the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation. Most, however, had little knowledge of its mechanics and regular operations unless they are plugged in to other groups such as the East Range Community Advisory Panels or efforts the ERJPB has led on topics such as broadband or child care. Activities that make the ERJPB more visible, such as the loan fund, help to boost its reputation in the community.

PERCEPTIONS OF DIRRR

ERJPB staff also asked interviewees their perceptions of the Department of Iron Range Resources and Rehabilitation (DIRRR). All but two respondents who had an opinion on this question had positive perceptions, and many cited specific projects or assistance they received that they believed had beneficial impacts for their communities. One had a more mixed view and argued it did good work but was overly political, while one had not had a positive experience working with the agency. Overall, East Range businesses appreciated the unique resources DIRRR can offer.

IF YOU WERE KING/QUEEN FOR A DAY...

The EJRPB invited interviewees to imagine scenarios in which they have full power over their communities for a day and asked what’s the one thing they would do. Responses varied widely and ranged from removing government regulations to banning plastic bags, and from creating a community to support people with dementia to attracting families with young children. The most frequent response centered on transportation infrastructure on the East Range, with responses ranging from specific projects (e.g., lane widening on Minnesota Highway 135) to devising funding mechanisms to fund projects over the long term. Other respondents emphasized the need for transportation options, particularly for the elderly. Several other responses appeared numerous times, including attraction of businesses and jobs, downtown revitalization, and continued improvement of recreation amenities. Several Aurora residents longed for the return of a grocery store, while several in Hoyt Lakes hoped they would not lose theirs.

One Thing to Change in Community	Mentions
Improve Transportation Infrastructure	7
Attract more businesses and jobs	3
Bring in a grocery store (Aurora)	3
Revitalize downtowns	3
Housing	3
Improve recreation/trail networks	3

THE STATE OF EAST RANGE BUSINESS BROADBAND

As part of its business visits and with support from the East Range Blandin Broadband Communities community project funding, ERJPB staff created a broadband survey based on similar surveys used in other communities. This survey aimed to understand the businesses’ current opinions on their broadband service, how they use the internet in their work, and highlight any specific issues or challenge the businesses face. This section presents the results of these interview questions.

OVERALL SATISFACTION

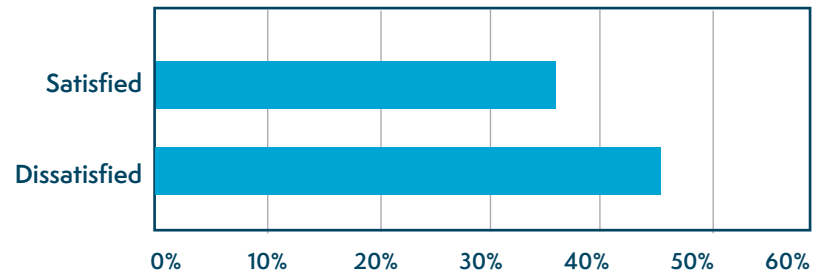
Just over half of the visited businesses said they were dissatisfied with their current level of service. There were few clear trends among businesses using certain providers; while overall Zito Media users seemed somewhat more satisfied if and when they were able to connect to its service, the sentiment was not universal. And while nearly half of businesses said they were satisfied with their level of service, several of those satisfied users still saw a real need for improved service in the future. Several business owners, most notably those in the financial services industry, emphasized the need for continued innovation and improvement to remain competitive.

When given a choice between fast service and reliable service, businesses tended toward reliability, though there was no consensus across the board. The results mirrored those in a visioning session conducted as part of the East Range’s broadband feasibility study committee in which participants emphasized a need for all possible solutions and improvement across the board rather than targeting specific issues with service. While not explicitly tracked by ERJPB’s survey, several business owners described their experience with providers’ customer service with exasperation.

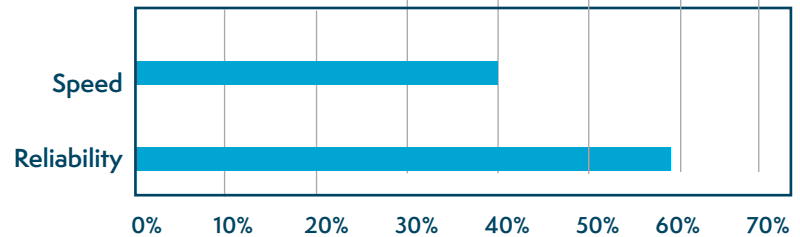
PROVIDERS

Currently, businesses are fairly evenly spread among the three major broadband providers in the area: Frontier, Mediacom, and Zito Media. A not insignificant number, frustrated with or unable to access those three options, are using other providers, including satellite internet, Access Broadband out of Virginia, and other private options, several of which required elaborate setups with microwaves being beamed from other locations through various towers. With upgrades in service, incumbent providers could conceivably capture some of these businesses.

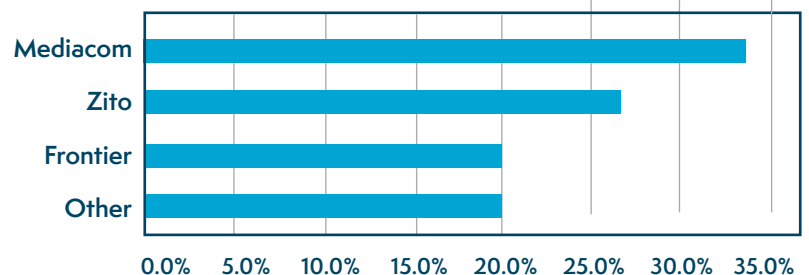
SATISFACTION WITH CURRENT SERVICE



WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT, SPEED OR RELIABILITY?



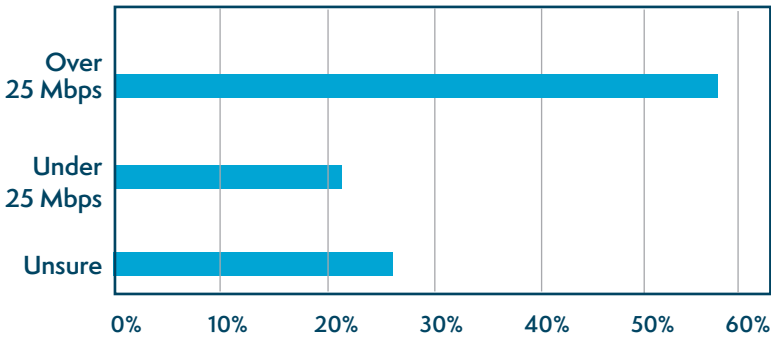
BROADBAND PROVIDER



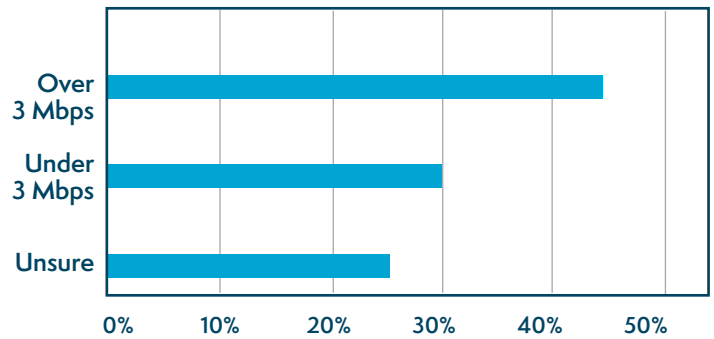
SPEED

A small majority of businesses reported receiving speeds at or higher than the state’s 2022 broadband goal of 25 Mbps download, and slightly lower numbers fell short of 3 Mbps upload speeds. This ratio, with or without the inclusion of those who were unable to perform the speed test, is lower than the 86% figure cited in [St. Louis County’s Blandin BroadbandProfile for 2019](#), suggesting the East Range lags behind the county.

DOWNLOAD SPEEDS



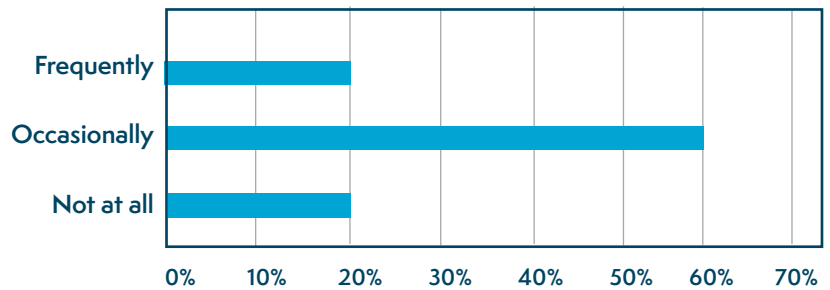
UPLOAD SPEEDS



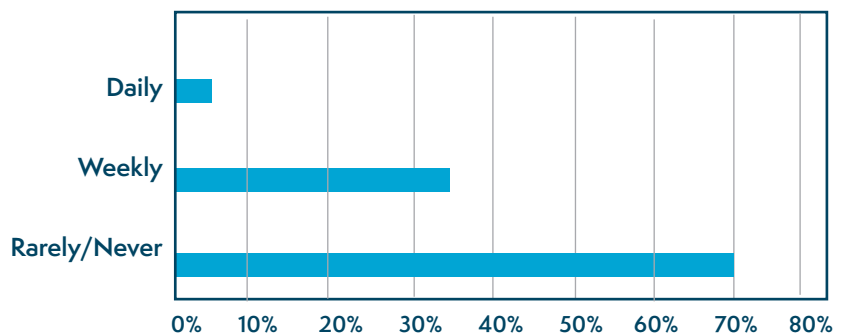
RELIABILITY

A majority of businesses do not experience unexpected downtimes, though a substantial number still face weekly or even daily issues. Only 20% reported no issues with their service, while the same number reported frequent issues, and a majority reported occasional challenges. One added that downtimes had been increasing, not decreasing, over the past year.

HOW OFTEN DOES RELIABILITY AFFECT BUSINESS?



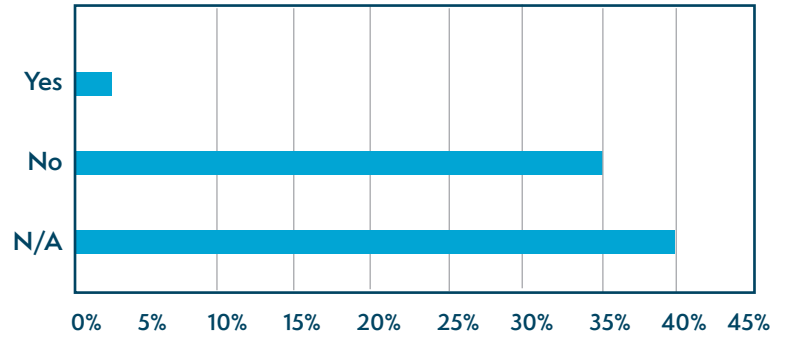
REGULARITY OF UNSCHEDULED DOWNTIME



EFFECTS ON BUSINESS

All East Range businesses use the internet in some capacity for their businesses, and while a handful simply maintain a basic web presence, most use it for a broad range of activities. One business owner reported needing to stand outside to get a good enough signal to process credit card payments using a square, while one interviewee in the lodging business said service levels were keeping away certain types of clients. Another business owner records videos to teach classes and is unable to do so at her work location, so she records them at home, where she has faster service. Still another business owner reported the opposite problem: while content with service at his own business, he said his clients' frequent lack of reliable internet at home hampered his ability to provide remote services. Business managers in the healthcare field also emphasized these problematic inconsistencies as telemedicine becomes more common and shared their struggles accessing secure records through existing internet.

DOES INTERNET ACCESS OR RELIABILITY AFFECT WORKER'S ABILITY TO WORK FROM HOME?

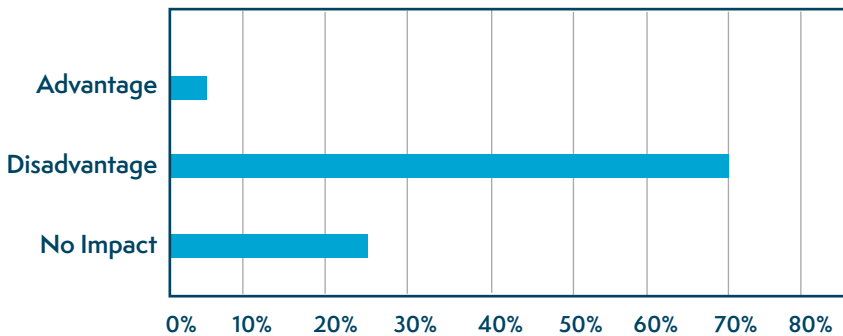


Several business owners were content with their own service but saw a lack of quality broadband in homes as a direct threat. While a plurality of surveyed businesses did not report issues with remote work, many of these were in direct service businesses in which such work is difficult, if not impossible. Over half of the surveyed businesses offered employees the ability to work remotely for at least some tasks, and most of these found they were not able to function adequately given the level of service at employees' homes. As the COVID-19 crisis has shown, the ability to work remotely can be vital to keeping businesses afloat.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EAST RANGE

A clear majority of surveyed businesses believed the current state of broadband on the East Range left them at a competitive disadvantage, and only one found the current landscape advantageous. While several acknowledged the area's somewhat older population base as a drawback to online business, they still agreed that it was an essential piece of the area's future. Even those with weak web presences acknowledged it was something they could probably improve. Only one expressed no real interest in using the internet to market their businesses, even though he knew it would probably help; two other managers were frustrated with owners over a lack of willingness to maintain what they believed to be a necessary online presence. Unsurprisingly, these businesses were all among those who reported struggles in the ERJPB's general business survey questions.

BROADBAND ON THE EAST RANGE IS CURRENTLY A COMPETITIVE ...



Many business owners, regardless of their own level of service, thought broadband should be one of the East Range's foremost priorities. "Everyone deserves broadband at home," one opined; another said it would be the one issue he would solve if in charge of the East Range for a day. Several expressed concerns about their ability to attract skilled workforce to the region; even if they did successfully hire to fill positions, they speculated that employees from outside the area may choose to live further away and commute, simply because of broadband. Without steps to improve service, the East Range runs the risk of seeing its businesses fall further behind.

CONCLUSIONS

The trends from the ERJPB's 28 visits show a resilient business community that is adapting to economic realities. Highlights include:

- While many of the businesses are well-established, they also had high rates of innovation and try to update their offerings to reflect changing technology and new economic opportunities.
- East Range businesses face a cyclical challenge of a lack of workforce, lack of jobs, and lack of amenities that come with concentrations of people and jobs.
- Firms in construction, mining, manufacturing, and finance seek to break this cycle by exporting new products to create jobs and wealth.
- Firms in the hospitality and other tourism-related sectors also see growth opportunities based on the region's recreation assets but are hampered by weak networks for cooperation and workforce challenges.
- Small-town feel, customer loyalty, and access to recreation opportunities keep East Range business owners feeling positive about their communities.
- Despite the economic challenges of recent decades, owners and managers tended to be upbeat about their communities' futures. They are deeply loyal to the East Range and want to keep their operations here and see businesses thrive.
- The East Range Joint Powers Board can help improve the business climate on the East Range by providing direct or indirect financial assistance, better connecting businesses in the same sectors, and tackling many of the interwoven quality of life issues that can make the East Range a desirable place to live and do business.
- Broadband speed and reliability remain serious issues on the East Range, and quality of service both in businesses and in homes in region has a direct effect on the business climate. Without direct action, broadband will remain a competitive disadvantage for the East Range.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on trends from the 28 business visits and comments from some of the interviewees, ERJPB staff recommends the following steps in response to local business needs:

1. Use the ERJPB loan fund to support local businesses and increase visibility. The businesses shared a widespread interest in re-launching an ERJPB loan fund, which is currently dormant, in some format. The ones familiar with the ERJPB loan fund thought it was an important part of the organization's work and it appeared to bring the most visibility of any of its existing efforts. Storefront improvements and other building alterations to bring them up to code and keep downtown real estate competitive with newer development registered highly as needs. Moreover, the businesses' high level of plans for new investments in their facilities shows there is demand for such a fund.

While the response to COVID-19 has re-energized debate around the future of the fund, it will also outlast this crisis and has the potential to drive future investment. The ERJPB could also seek to recapitalize the fund with support from DIRRR, creating additional leverage for East Range businesses. Such a fund would be the most direct way the ERJPB can make a difference for local businesses and in turn increase its exposure.

2. Explore a unified business presence. Currently, the East Range has two chambers of commerce and one citizen's association that serve its communities, but no unified voice for business. Aurora's Chamber of Commerce received some critiques for its meeting times and a general lack of business participation; "I'm not sure what they do, but they are welcoming," one interviewee opined. Another said the Hoyt Lakes chamber was well-run but functioned as "more of a civic organization than a chamber." In Biwabik, the Biwabik Area Citizens Association (BACA) makes some efforts that align with businesses' interests, but it does not primarily exist to serve businesses and has few incentives for businesses (as opposed to individuals) to join.

The result is a patchwork and somewhat collection of volunteer-led business resources on the East Range. If the chambers and BACA could unify their efforts through either regular meetings to align missions or even the creation of a single organization, they might be able to better represent East Range businesses and continue the area's tradition of uniting efforts to better serve its residents.

3. Explore ways to support business marketing efforts. Several interviewees, including many if not all the smaller downtown and retail-oriented businesses, expressed interest in marketing support from the ERJPB. Some have poor online presences or lack social media marketing skills, and the generally elevated ages of East Range business owners creates a barrier to learning new tools for some.

Businesses expressed an interest in expanding their marketing both to locals and, where appropriate, to broader audiences as well. One interviewee suggested the ERJPB find ways to better market to the area's substantial population of people with second homes. The ERJPB could arrange for sessions with local Small Business Development Center or other experts to deliver these training events.

4. Develop an incubator space for lease. The East Range lacks leasable space, particularly for new businesses for whom start-up or renovation costs may be prohibitive. There are also several opportunities in this area that are already under way. BACA in Biwabik has explored temporary shelters that would partially fulfill this purpose, and the City of Aurora owns a building that somewhat serves this purpose and currently is home to a business, though it has additional unused space and renovations could make it more viable. Hoyt Lakes, meanwhile, has several privately-owned buildings that could potentially fulfill this function. The goal of such a space is not to provide a permanent home for businesses, but to provide a location with lower barriers to entry that they can use to generate some income and eventually scale up to their own buildings.

5. Enhance interconnectedness of tourism efforts. Giants Ridge is already a major destination and trail network connections are a positive development for East Range tourism efforts, but there are numerous ways to better integrate the East Range communities with established amenities. These efforts can include a concerted effort to market amenities not at or immediately adjacent to Giants Ridge, with a focus on activities that do not compete with its offerings; several interviewees wondered what members of parties who do not ski, golf, or bike might do while staying in the area. Greater advertising of local businesses at lodging locations could help drive traffic, while another interviewee suggested a special rate for locals at recreation amenities so that the community does not perceive them as tourist-only attractions.

While an East Range-specific tourism effort runs the high risk of duplicating Iron Range Tourism Bureau (IRTB) services on a less efficient scale, there are ways to better work with and support its efforts. More concierges through the IRTB's Certified Tourism Ambassadors program could help make the desired connections between East Range businesses and attractions.

A local transportation offering to connect offsite hotels and East Range businesses with Giants Ridge could help drive business to and from these locations. Local trail user clubs could promote their activities to visitors and help connect visitors to area businesses and attractions that are further off the beaten path. A unified chamber of commerce with some staff capacity could theoretically play much of this connecting role and help ensure the IRTB has the resources it needs to promote East Range opportunities.

6. Continue East Range Broadband Advocacy Efforts. Over the past year and a half, the East Range has built some momentum behind its efforts to improve broadband service through its experience as a Blandin Broadband Community (BBC). Several community projects have boosted connectivity, and the impending feasibility study will provide the East Range with a wealth of data on its existing infrastructure.

The next steps will require concerted community outreach, advocacy, and organization. Projects may begin to happen at a piecemeal rate across the four communities, given the variety of existing providers and their offerings, but the Joint Powers Board should maintain a regional vision that celebrates any incremental success but recognizes the necessity of quality service for all residents of the East Range. As the responses to the broadband interview questions show, a unified front and shared goals are vital to any future plans to market the East Range as a place to do business or for new members of the local workforce to live.

