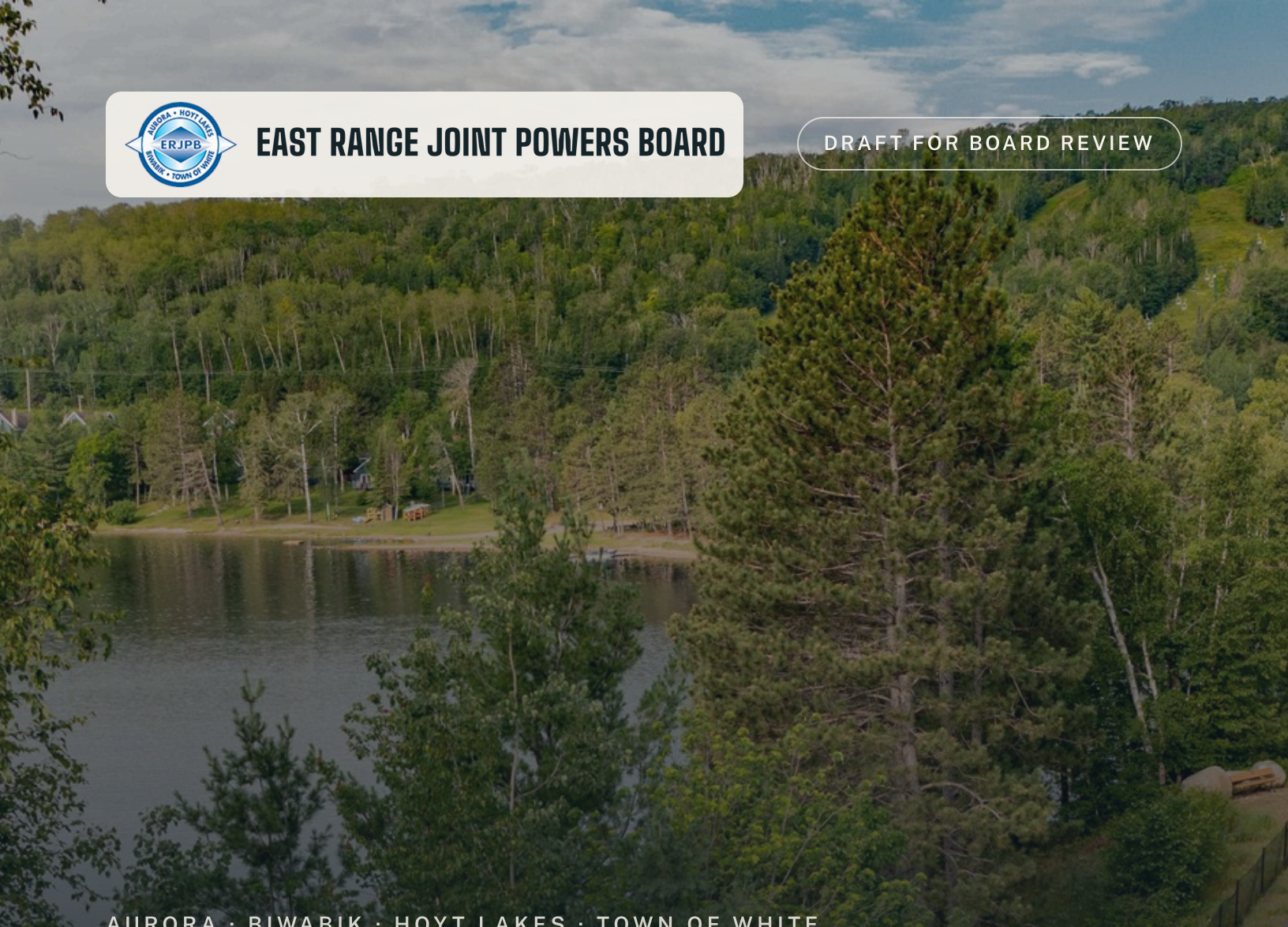


EAST RANGE JOINT POWERS BOARD

DRAFT FOR BOARD REVIEW

AURORA · BIWABIK · HOYT LAKES · TOWN OF WHITE

2027 STRATEGIC PLAN

One year of focused work, January through December 2027, to grow the East Range tax base using every tool available to the four communities.

PREPARED FOR
East Range Joint Powers Board

PREPARED BY
The Northspan Group, Inc.

BUILT FROM
September 23, 2026 strategy session

This document contains East Range Joint Powers Board (ERJPB) One-Year Strategic Plan, which runs from January through December 2027. The draft for Board review was built by Northspan from the September 23, 2026 strategy session, the pre-workshop survey, and the 2024-2026 plan dashboard.

THE PLAN

OVERARCHING FOCUS: INCREASE THE TAX BASE USING EVERY AVAILABLE TOOL

Every action in this plan emerged because it adds taxable value to the four East Range communities or puts a financial tool to work doing so. As participants noted in the section, success means "increasing the tax base and utilizing financial tools," and it means executing rather than studying.

The plan concentrates one year of effort on five strategic directions. Business retention and housing production carry the heaviest weight, because the survey named them the top priorities and because filled storefronts and new homes are the fastest routes to a larger tax base. The other three directions build the workforce, internal coordination, and public visibility that make the first two possible.

HEADLINE MEASURES FOR THE YEAR

MEASURE	BASELINE (SET Q1 2027)	2027 TARGET	SOURCE
Combined taxable market value, four communities	2026 assessment	Increase over 2026	St. Louis County Assessor
Value of new construction permits issued	2026 total	Increase over 2026	City and township permit logs
Financial tools put to work (loans, grants, TIF, abatement, IRRR, USDA)	Count from 2026	At least 8 distinct uses	Northspan quarterly report
ERJPB loan fund dollars deployed	$327K cumulative, ~$63K available	Remaining balance committed and recapitalization applied for	Loan fund ledger
Plan actions completed on schedule	New	80% of actions on track at each quarterly review	Dashboard

WHO WE ARE

VISION, MISSION, AND CORE VALUES

The ERJPB developed its Mission, Vision, and Core Values ahead of its 2024-2026 strategic plan, and they remain unchanged for this plan:

VISION The region to live, work, and play.

MISSION To improve the lives of our residents by fostering collaboration among East Range communities.

CORE VALUES

Collaborative
We build bridges across the four East Range communities and with local and regional partners to promote comprehensive solutions for us all.

Supportive
We share resources across our communities and acknowledge the success of one community brings benefits to the entire area.

Trusting
We build deep relationships with one another and believe our tight-knit networks are the foundations for the future of the East Range.

Responsive
We recognize the voices of community members and adapt our efforts to address our most urgent needs and challenges.

2027 STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

01 Building Workforce Connections

02 Attracting and Retaining Businesses

03 Securing a Housing Partner

04 Collaborating for Coordination

05 Informing the Public

Each direction below lists its actions, who is responsible, start and due quarters, and the measures the Board will use to judge success. Actions marked (priority) were starred or circled during the session and are the first-90-day focus.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 01 / 05

BUILDING WORKFORCE CONNECTIONS

The East Range cannot grow its tax base without people to fill jobs in local government, healthcare, and the businesses it wants to keep. Leadership turnover was the most cited change since the last plan, and succession in city/town halls creates challenges for communities.

#	ACTION	START	DUE	RESPONSIBLE
1.1	Pursue a partnership with a Minnesota college public administration two-year program to build a local government succession cohort for city and township staff	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan with Admins Group
1.2	Convene East Range healthcare employers to define a shared healthcare workforce attraction package	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Northspan with healthcare partners
1.3	Inventory the family-friendly features that attract and keep workers: kids' programs, theater, parks, and events	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Marketing Committee
1.4	Promote the inventory on the website in 2027	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Marketing Committee

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

SAID AT THE SESSION	MEASURABLE INDICATOR	2027 TARGET
Succession planning for local government	College partner and program path confirmed for the cohort	Partner college identified and program path confirmed by Q3 2027, with enrollment opening in 2028
Fun and happy community	Family-friendly inventory complete and in use	Inventory published by Q2 2027

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 02 / 05

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING BUSINESSES

This is the direction with the most direct line to the tax base. Survey respondents described businesses at a tipping point and empty storefronts that will be harder to refill than to keep occupied. The loan fund has had successes, with seven loans made and roughly $63,000 still available, and the session asked for more ambition with it.

#	ACTION	START	DUE	RESPONSIBLE
2.1	Complete a Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) visit round covering every community, with a shared intake form and follow-up log PRIORITY	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan with Communities
2.2	Connect every business flagged at risk during visits to a financing or technical assistance tool within 30 days	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan
2.3	Inventory vacant commercial space in all four communities and publish an available-properties list	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Admins Group with Northspan
2.4	Market the vacant-space list to prospects and site selectors through the website and regional partners	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Marketing Committee
2.5	Advance a new childcare facility to a selected site, operator, and funding plan PRIORITY	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan with Communities and ISD 2711
2.6	Recruit or seed a new destination business such as a brewery, pairing a site with loan fund and partner financing as necessary PRIORITY	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan with Marketing Committee
2.7	Apply for USDA Rural Business Development Grant or Intermediary Relending Program funds to recapitalize the ERJPB loan fund	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan
2.8	Evaluate the Loon Lake Community Center as an incubator space and bring a go or no-go recommendation to the Board	Q2 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan with the Town of White
2.9	Host an East Range Summit that includes a business resource component	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan with Marketing Committee

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

SAID AT THE SESSION	MEASURABLE INDICATOR	2027 TARGET
Less vacant space	Number of vacant commercial storefronts and buildings on the Q2 2027 inventory	At least 3 listed spaces leased, sold, or under redevelopment by Q4 2027
No involuntary business closures	Involuntary closures among businesses visited in the BRE round	Zero involuntary closures among visited businesses; every at-risk business connected to a tool within 30 days
A signature business project to point to	Named project under construction or open	One project (childcare facility or new destination business) with site control and financing committed by Q4 2027
Utilizing financial tools	Loan fund activity and recapitalization	At least 2 new loans closed, remaining balance committed, and one recapitalization application submitted
Increasing the tax base	New or expanded commercial value from assisted projects	Every assisted project reported with its estimated taxable value added

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 03 / 05

SECURING A HOUSING PARTNER

Housing has moved from study to production. The Housing Institute cohort is complete, communities have identified priority sites, the three cities are all engaged with North Shore Development Company, and the survey's clearest message was that homes now need to be built. New residential construction is a major lever on the tax base available to the East Range.

#	ACTION	START	DUE	RESPONSIBLE
3.1	Package priority sites for communities into a single developer prospectus with site data, incentives, and infrastructure status	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Admins Group and Northspan
3.2	Work with communities to determine appetite for commitment to funding incentives	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Admins Group and Northspan
3.3	Explore using University of Minnesota cell phone mobility data to document commuter and visitor demand for housing marketing and developer conversations	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Northspan
3.4	Present the prospectus to at least six regional developers and builders, including nonprofit and modular partners	Q2 2027	Q3 2027	Northspan
3.5	Secure a signed development agreement or letter of intent for at least one site PRIORITY	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Communities; North Shore Development Company to draft documents
3.6	Assemble the financing stack for the first project using every available tool: TIF, tax abatement, IRRR, Minnesota Housing, and the Seller Readiness Rehabilitation Program balance	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Host communities; Northspan available to support
3.7	Report housing progress at every ERJPB meeting using a one-page site tracker	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

SAID AT THE SESSION	MEASURABLE INDICATOR	2027 TARGET
Shovels in the ground	Housing units with permits pulled or under construction on an identified site	Aspire to construction start on at least one site, or a signed development agreement with a 2028 start date
Shared developers and opportunities	Developer contacts made with the regional prospectus	At least 6 developer presentations and 2 site visits
Increasing the tax base	Projected taxable value of committed housing units (including impact of any incentives used)	Projected value reported to the Board for every committed project
Utilizing financial tools	Tools committed to the first project	At least 3 distinct financing tools in the stack, if necessary

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 04 / 05

COLLABORATING FOR COORDINATION

Understaffing and levy limits are the binding constraints on everything else in this plan. Sharing people, tools, and documents across the four communities stretches capacity without raising taxes, and a current list of financial tools makes sure no project misses money it could have used.

#	ACTION	START	DUE	RESPONSIBLE
4.1	Compile a regional, state, and federal financial tools and grants calendar showing what is available, for what, and when PRIORITY	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Northspan
4.2	Update the tools calendar quarterly and review it at an ERJPB meeting each quarter	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan
4.3	Select and adopt a shared document and communication platform for the four communities and ERJPB	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Admins Group with Northspan
4.4	Create side-by-side reference documents for short-term rentals, cannabis, and licenses and permits, using the Spring 2026 reports as the base	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Admins Group
4.5	Build a shared five-year capital projects calendar and identify at least two projects to bid or finance jointly	Q1 2027	Q3 2027	Admins Group with Board
4.6	Scope a shared IT resource on the same terms for Board decision	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Admins Group
4.7	Coordinate blight enforcement by aligning ordinances, notice templates, and enforcement schedules across communities	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Admins Group
4.8	Identify and act on at least two pairing or sharing opportunities for staff, equipment, or services	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Admins Group

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

SAID AT THE SESSION	MEASURABLE INDICATOR	2027 TARGET
Easy access to tools and resources	Tools calendar published and in use	Published by Q2 2027, updated 3 times, and cited in at least 4 applications or Board decisions
A framework for sharing, like a Workday platform	Communities actively using the shared platform	4 of 4 communities onboarded by Q3 2027 with documents posted monthly
Utilizing financial tools	Grant applications submitted with Northspan grant-writing support	At least 4 applications submitted on behalf of ERJPB or its communities
Coordination on capital projects	Joint capital projects identified and advanced	At least 2 joint projects with a shared schedule or bid
Collaboration on blight	Blight cases resolved under the coordinated approach	Baseline count set Q2 2027; resolved cases reported quarterly

STRATEGIC DIRECTION 05 / 05

INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Residents, councils, and visitors need to see what ERJPB does and why it matters. A new cast of local leaders means existing products have to be reintroduced, and tax base growth depends on visitors and prospects knowing the East Range is open for business and recreation.

#	ACTION	START	DUE	RESPONSIBLE
5.1	Submit a recap of every ERJPB meeting in the East Range Times within two weeks of the meeting	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan
5.2	Update the ERJPB website home page to state the Board's unique "why" and its 2027 priorities	Q1 2027	Q2 2027	Marketing Committee with Northspan
5.3	Launch a recreation marketing campaign aimed at trail users, in partnership with Giants Ridge and Discover the Range	Q2 2027	Q3 2027	Marketing Committee
5.4	Add a clear hospitality call to action to every marketing piece, pointing visitors to where to stay, eat, and shop	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Marketing Committee
5.5	Open every ERJPB meeting with a community spotlight or business of the quarter to reinforce the collaborative culture	Q1 2027	Q4 2027	Board with Northspan
5.6	Present the plan and its progress to all four councils and boards once during the year	Q2 2027	Q4 2027	Northspan
5.7	Review ERJPB meeting times and schedule one meeting per quarter in the afternoon or evening so more residents and business owners can attend	Q1 2027	Q1 2027	Board with Northspan

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

SAID AT THE SESSION	MEASURABLE INDICATOR	2027 TARGET
Regular presence in the media	Meeting recaps and stories published	12 recaps published, one per meeting, plus at least 4 additional feature stories
Communicate our unique why	Website updated and traffic to it	New home page live by Q2 2027; website sessions up 25% over 2026
Market recreational amenities	Trail-user campaign reach	Campaign live by Q3 2027 with reach and engagement reported quarterly
Hospitality with a clear call to action	Pieces carrying the CTA	100% of 2027 marketing pieces carry the hospitality CTA
Collaborative culture at meetings	Spotlights delivered and council presentations made	12 spotlights and 4 council presentations completed

KEEPING SCORE

MEASUREMENT AND REVIEW

ERJPB will review this plan quarterly against the dashboard, with the headline tax base measures reported twice a year.

FIRST 90 DAYS (JANUARY THROUGH MARCH 2027)

01 Start the BRE visit round and the vacant-space inventory (2.1, 2.3).

02 Set the childcare facility and destination business projects in motion with site and partner conversations (2.5, 2.6).

03 Publish the financial tools and grants calendar (4.1).

04 Package the housing sites into the developer prospectus (3.1).

05 Pull every baseline: taxable market value, permit value, vacant storefronts, nursing home rating and openings, website sessions.

REVIEW CADENCE

WHEN	WHAT THE BOARD SEES	WHO PREPARES IT
Every monthly meeting	Housing site tracker and any at-risk business follow-ups	Housing Committee and Northspan
Each quarter	Dashboard with every action marked on track, behind, or complete, plus the tools calendar update	Northspan
July 2027	Mid-year report on headline measures and any actions to adjust	Northspan
December 2027	Year-end report on all measures and a recommendation for the 2028 plan	Northspan

APPENDIX A

EAST RANGE MARKETING PLAN DASHBOARD

3-Year (2026-2028) East Range Strategic Marketing Plan. The marketing committee's three-year plan runs alongside this strategic plan; its actions under Strategic Direction 5 draw on the categories below.

VISION

A regional identity that inspires pride.

MISSION

To connect and amplify marketing efforts that showcase local events, engage the community, and drive economic vitality.

● Complete or completed and ongoing ● In process ● Not yet started

CATEGORY 1 STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY & VISITOR ENGAGEMENT

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A1.	Launch Unified Events Calendar Coordination Integrate with the Discover the Range (DTR) calendar for comprehensive event visibility.	Q1 2026	Q2 2026	●	Beth & Elissa
A2.	Drive Adoption of the Discover the Range (DTR) Calendar Encourage organizations and partners to consistently use the platform.	Q2 2026	Ongoing	●	All, mainly city adminstration
A3.	Expand Social Media Presence of DTR Leverage East Range social platforms to amplify reach and engagement.	Q2 2026	Ongoing	●	All, mainly city adminstration
A4.	Create a Centralized Information Hub on the EastRange.com website Provide one-stop access for community resources, events, and updates.	Q2 2026	Ongoing	●	NS with City Admin

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- Launch a unified events calendar and onboard organizations
- Expand social media presence
- Increase CTA certifications
- 80% of local orgs using calendar
- +30% followers across platforms
- +50% certified ambassadors

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A5.	Increase the Number of Certified Tourism Ambassadors (CTAs) Train more local representatives to deliver exceptional visitor experiences.	Q3 2026	Q4 2026		Beth & Elissa
A6.	Promote CTA Certification as Professional Development Position CTA training as a valuable skill for hospitality and service workers.	Q4 2026	Q1 2027		Group

CATEGORY 2 MOBILIZING VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A1.	Develop a Comprehensive Volunteer Program Includes corporate partnerships, youth engagement, and tiered opportunities.	Q1 2026	Q3 2026		Miriam, Ashley, Lindsey, Emily
A2.	Engage Corporations with Customized Volunteer Initiatives Combine “corporate lean-in” and bespoke programs into one action.	Q1 2026	Q4 2026		Miriam, Ashley, Lindsey, Emily
A3.	Build and Expand Youth Volunteer Networks Covers high school involvement, recruiting younger volunteers, and promoting youth/community volunteerism.	Q1 2026	Q4 2026		Miriam, Ashley, Lindsey, Emily
A4.	Create Incentives and Recognition Programs Includes “Gold Card” and scholarship opportunities for youth.	Q3 2026	Q4 2026		Giants Ridge team
A5.	Design Tiered Volunteer Opportunities Offer flexible levels of involvement for different demographics.	Q3 2026	Q4 2026		Giants Ridge team

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- Increase volunteer participation
- Build high school volunteer network
- Launch volunteer incentive program
- Secure ATV/OHV partnerships
- +25% volunteers
- 1 schools participating
- 200 volunteers enrolled
- 2 organizations partnered

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A6.	Implement Centralized Volunteer Sign-Up and Coordination System Streamline registration and management across all programs, i.e. United Way portal.	Q1 2026	Q3 2026		Miriam, Emily
A7.	Leverage Outdoor Recreation Trends to Increase Volunteerism Across Sectors Capitalize on and partner with ATV/OHV organizations.	Q1 2026	Q4 2026		Group

CATEGORY 3 ESTABLISHING AN EAST RANGE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A1.	Conduct a Regional Chamber Assessment Review current organizations: Hoyt Lakes Chamber, Aurora Chamber, and Biwabik Area Civic Association to identify strengths and gaps.	Q3 2026	Q4 2026		Northspan and stakeholders
A2.	Engage Existing Chambers and Associations Host joint meetings to explore collaboration opportunities and shared priorities.	Q3 2026	Q4 2026		Northspan and stakeholders
A3.	Develop a Consolidation or Partnership Benefit Framework Outline options for merging, affiliating, or creating a unified East Range Chamber model.	Q1 2027	Q1 2027		Northspan and stakeholders
A4.	Create a Governance and Membership Structure Define leadership roles, membership tiers, and decision-making processes for the new chamber.	Q2 2027	Q2 2027		Northspan and stakeholders
A5.	Secure Founding Members and Funding Commitments Recruit at least 20 businesses and secure initial financial support.	TBD	TBD		All
A6.	Launch the East Range Chamber of Commerce Establish branding, website, and communication channels for the new entity.	TBD	TBD		New Chamber

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- Form East Range Chamber of Commerce
- 20 founding members

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A7.	Promote Regional Business Collaboration Initiatives Develop programs for networking, advocacy, and economic development under the new chamber, e.g. Shop Small.	TBD	TBD		New Chamber

CATEGORY 4 ENHANCING YEAR-ROUND TOURISM EVENTS

#	ACTION	START	DUE	STATUS	RESPONSIBLE
A1.	Audit and Consolidate Existing Signature Events Review current events like Laskiainen, Pepsi Challenge, Water Carnival, and others to ensure they are listed on the Discover the Range (DTR) calendar.	Q2 2026	Q3 2026		All
A2.	Create a Comprehensive Year-Round Events Calendar and post on DTR Include all signature events with confirmed dates, locations, and seasonal distribution to minimize gaps.	Q2 2026	Ongoing		Beth
A3.	Develop Seasonal Gap-Filling Experiences Identify months with fewer events — such as April and November — and introduce new attractions like winter trails, fall festivals, or cultural workshops.	Q1 2027	Q2 2027		All
A4.	Coordinate Marketing and Promotion Schedule Implement a social media marketing timeline: posts two weeks and four days before each event, using the provided schedule for consistency.	Q2 2026	Q2 2027		All
A5.	Strengthen Partnerships with Local Businesses and Chambers Encourage sponsorships, cross-promotions, and bundled experiences to increase attendance and economic impact.	Q3 2026	Q4 2027		Northspan/City admin/elected officials
A6.	Revive and Relaunch the East Range Summit Position the Summit as a premier annual event for regional collaboration, innovation, and economic development.	Q2 2026	Q2 2026		Elissa, Karl, and Ali

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- Introduce new tourism experiences
- Relaunch East Range Summit
- 2 new events launched
- 70 attendees, 3 partners