

benton snapshot

OVERVIEW

The community of Benton, California is very much a product of its rich history, regional surroundings and natural resources.

Benton's planning issues revolve around land use, land ownership, location and type of potential growth, allocation and preservation of natural resources and access to recreation. Central to these issues is the transportation infrastructure that links the community and greatly influences circulation for all travelers.

This snapshot provides an overall framework for these issues, placing them within the context of the town's history, geography, demographics, land usage and other factors.

LOCAL HISTORY

Benton flourished as a mining town in the 1860s, hosting almost 5,000 residents. An initial gold strike in

1862 attracted newcomers, and a thriving silver mining industry helped the town prosper for more than 50 years. Since then, Benton's population has declined dramatically and it now includes approximately 350 residents. Most new residents are attracted to Benton based on its remote lifestyle and affordable housing as compared to other communities in Mono County.

Historic Benton lies four miles west of the town center and features the Benton Hot Springs Bed and Breakfast and a campground popular with locals and tourists. Established in 1852 as a resting place for travelers heading to nearby Bodie and Aurora, the Hot Springs Resort is a historic resource that provides a glimpse into Benton's past. The resort features the Old House and the Benton General Store, two of the few remaining structures dating back to Benton's mining-boom era. While the hot springs is open to visitors, the historic Benton



General Store is closed. The resort covers almost 1,000 acres, with most of the land committed to open space through a conservation easement applied in 2007.

REGIONAL AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

An unincorporated community in Mono County, Benton lies at the northern end of the Tri-Valley, a regional planning area that includes the unincorporated communities of Hamill Valley and Chalfant to the south.

Benton is located at the intersection of US 6 and SR 120 near the Nevada border, about 35 miles north

of Bishop on the eastern side of the Sierra Mountains. SR 120 bisects the community; the eastern entrance announces Benton as the Gateway to Lee Vining and other regional attractions including Yosemite, Mammoth Lakes, Mono Lake and Bodie.

Benton lies 5,377 feet above sea level nestled in a valley surrounded by mountains that include Boundary Peak (13,143 feet elevation)—the highest peak in Nevada, and Montgomery Peak—(13,441 feet elevation), in California.

Figure 1 illustrates Benton’s regional context.

According to 2000 US Census data, Mono County’s total population is 12,853. The Tri-Valley Region, which encompasses the communities of Benton, Hamill Valley and Chalfant has a population of 954. Benton has approximately 331 residents, Chalfant has 465 residents and the Hamill Valley has 158 residents. In comparison, the Town of Mammoth Lakes, the only incorporated community in the county, has a population of over 7,000.

The median age of Tri-Valley residents is 39.5. Between 1990 and 2000, the population of residents aged 65 and older increased from 10 percent to 12 percent of the overall population.



Benton includes a concentration of Mono County’s Latino and Native American populations: 60 residents and 56 residents, respectively. The Benton Paiute Tribe has reservation land and also owns several properties and businesses in Benton, including the Benton Station/Cafe.

The majority of Benton residents work in nearby Mammoth and Bishop. The 2000 US Census estimates that Benton’s working population has 93 employed residents. Benton residents have some of the highest drive-to-work times in the county, reflecting the lack of employment opportunities in the immediate area.

In 2000, the Tri-Valley area included 272 families and the average family size was 2.96 persons (3.15 in Benton). In 2000, 62 percent of occupied housing units in Benton were owner-occupied and 38 percent were renter-occupied. In the Tri-Valley region overall, 79 percent of occupied housing units were owner-occupied and 21 percent were renter-occupied.

Population projections for the Tri-Valley are mixed: State of California Department of Finance (DOF) projections predict that the Tri-Valley population will grow to 1,206 (a 26 percent increase) by 2020, while Mono County

FIGURE 1: BENTON REGIONAL CONTEXT

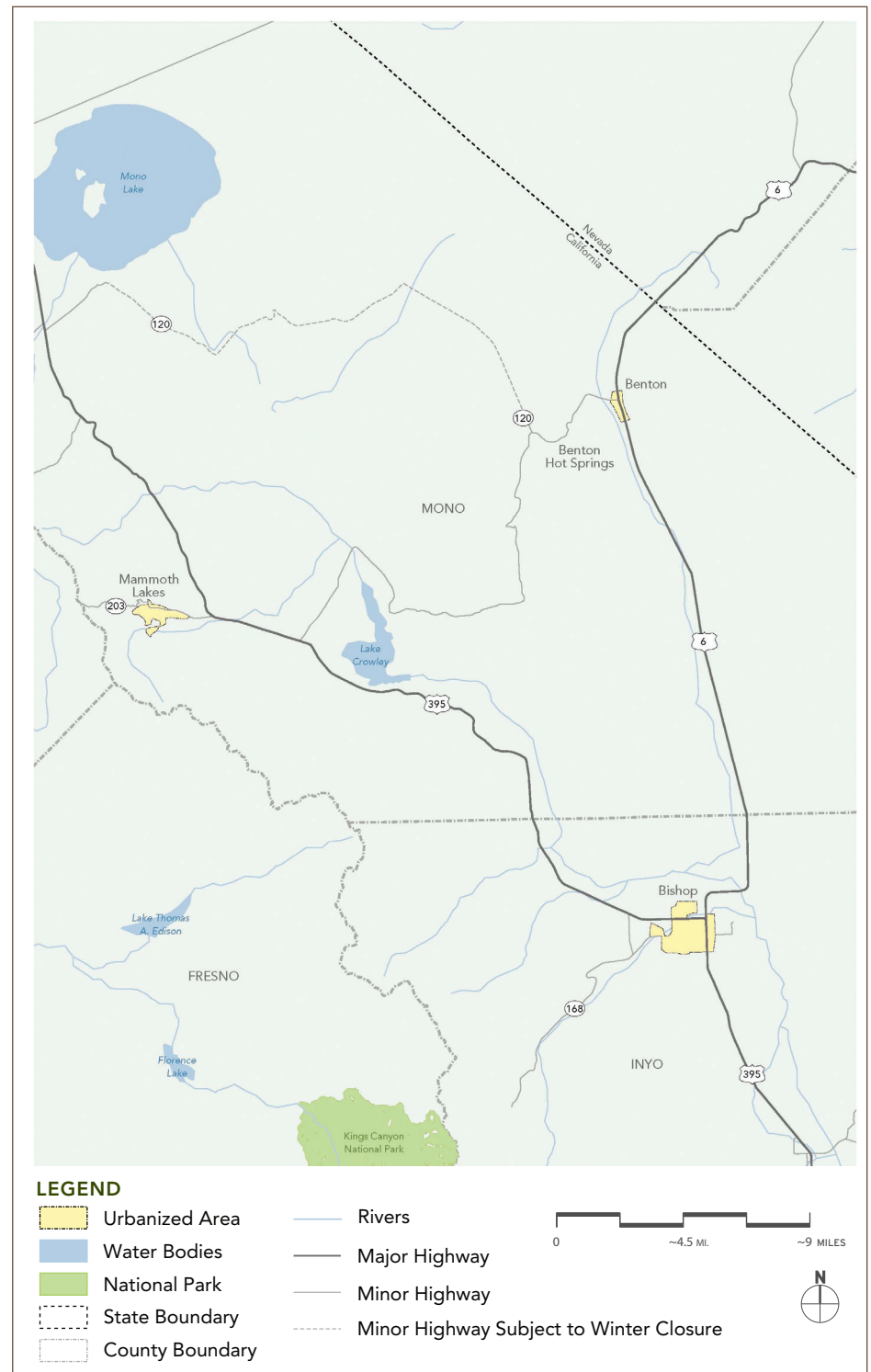
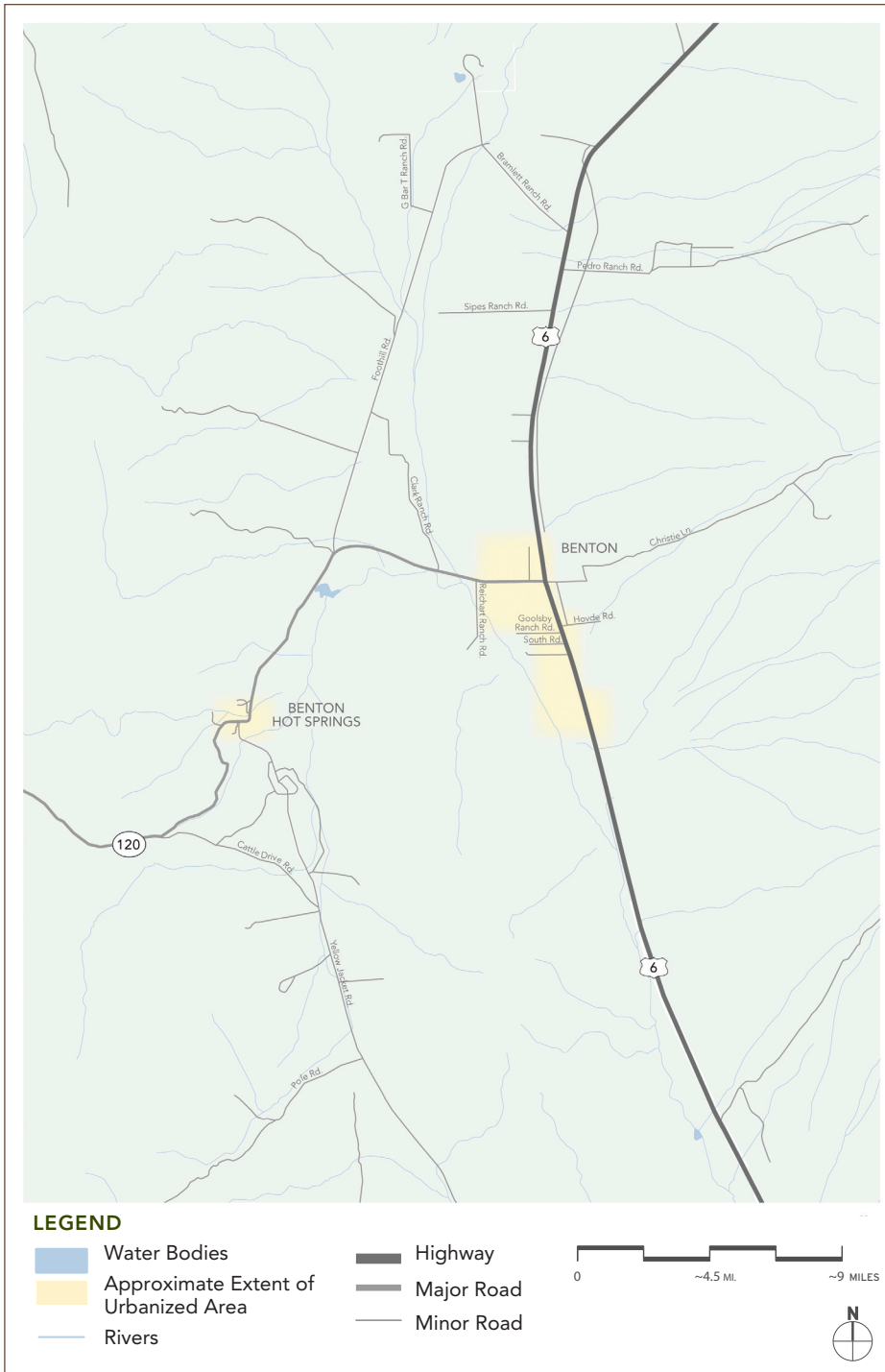


FIGURE 2: BENTON LOCAL CONTEXT



planning documents maintain that DOF projections appear low and do not account for population growth in the area.

Population growth in the Town of Mammoth Lakes, located approximately 50 miles to the north, is likely to impact the future demographic composition of Benton. Mammoth Lakes is home to the majority of employment opportunities in Mono County, including service, retail and government jobs. Mammoth Lakes' continuing popularity as a resort community has driven up housing costs, limiting housing options for low and moderate-income residents and forcing workers to look elsewhere, including Benton, for housing. An aging of the regional population is also expected.

Figure 2 demonstrates Benton's local context.

LAND USE AND ZONING

Every parcel of land in the unincorporated areas of Mono County, including Benton and the Tri-Valley Area, has been assigned a land use designation in the Mono County General Plan Land Use Element, October 2007.



The principal land uses in Benton, not including publicly-owned Resource Management lands (which cover 85 percent of the acreage), are residential and agricultural. Agriculture accounts for over 8 percent of the land and Rural Residential accounts for 4.1 percent. The remaining 2.6 percent comprises Mixed Use, Public Facilities, Commercial, Industrial and Resource Management and Rural Resort.

Agricultural Data

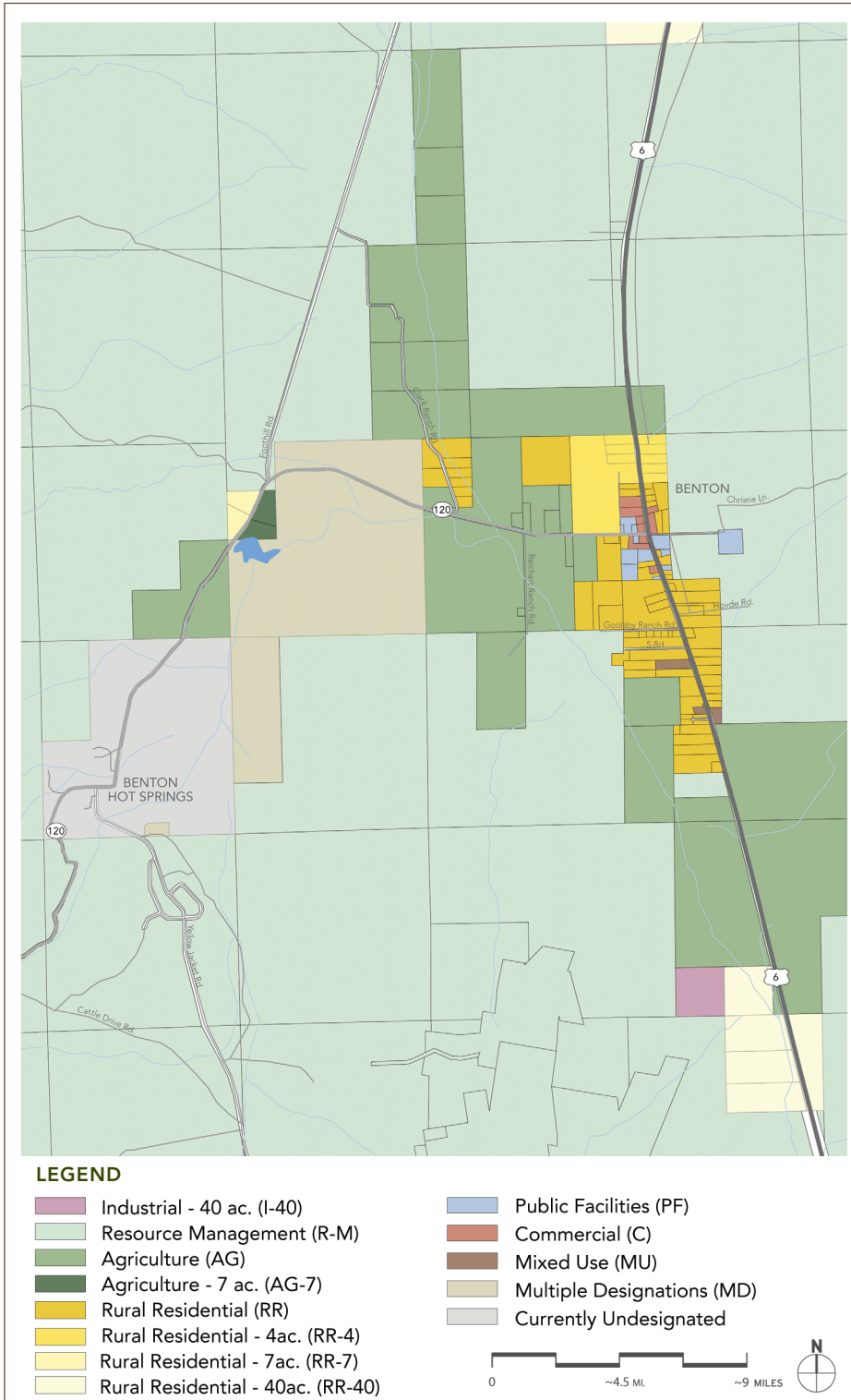
Designated agricultural land varies by area; however, the minimum parcel size is generally 2.5 acres. Primary

crops include alfalfa, carrots and garlic along with irrigated pasture and grazing. Other agricultural size categorizations are 5 acre minimum and 7 acre minimum. Agricultural land uses line SR-120 and US 6 and also tends to include waterways and streams in Benton. Some agricultural lands are located near residential areas and are not currently in agricultural use. A return to agricultural use on these parcels is unlikely.

Rural Residential Data

Rural residential parcel sizes are 1 to 40 acres in size and run along US 6 in

FIGURE 3: BENTON LAND USE



Benton. Commercial buildings and public facilities are concentrated on the SR 120/US 6 (120/6) intersection, as depicted in **Figure 3**.

LAND USE DESIGNATIONS

Table 1 describes Benton land uses.

The Mono County General Plan Land Use Element contains projected buildout figures for each community area in the County. Buildout figures are calculated based on the allowable densities established for each land use designation in the community area. Buildout figures are determined under the assumption that the maximum number of housing units allowed under each land use designation is possible. It is unlikely that all large parcels of private land will be developed due to environmental constraints, lack of access, lack of infrastructure, and community interests to maintain large parcels of designated agricultural lands as open space.

In Benton, the additional development allowed by the Mono County General Plan would be predominantly rural, along with limited commercial and mixed-use development that could incorporate residential uses. Commercial development would occur in the existing community along SR 120 and

TABLE 1: LAND USE DESIGNATION IN BENTON

Land Use Designation	Permitted Uses	Parcel Size
Agriculture (AG)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intends to preserve agricultural uses, to protect agricultural uses from encroachment from urban uses, and to provide for the orderly activities related to agriculture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. parcel size: 2.5 acres
Commercial (C)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wide range of commercial uses including commercial lodging and higher density housing, when found compatible with retail and service functions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. lot area: varies depending on the use Min. district area: 5 acres
Industrial (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heavy industrial uses that may potentially cause moderate to higher degrees of environmental nuisances or hazards. Industrial areas are to be located in areas remote from residential and commercial development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. lot area: 10,000 s.f. Min. district area: 30 acres
Mixed Use (MU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides for a wide range of compatible resident- and visitor-oriented residential and commercial uses, including business, professional and retail uses. Mixed use designated areas are intended to provide a transition between intensive commercial use and residential uses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. lot area: varies depending on the use Min. district area: 5 acres
Public/Quasi-Public Facilities (PF)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variety of public and quasi-public facilities and uses. Permitted uses include: grazing of horses, cattle, sheep and goats; small scale recreational uses; structure accessory to these uses; and, other uses permitted by the public landowner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No development standards
Resource Management (RM)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low-intensity rural uses that recognize and maintain the resource values of the parcel. Resource management designation indicates that land may be valuable for uses including, but not limited to, recreation, surface water conservation, groundwater conservation and recharge, wetlands conservation, habitat protection for special status species, wildlife habitat, visual resources, cultural resources, geothermal or mineral resources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Min. parcel size: 40 acres
Rural Residential (RR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Larger-lot single-family dwelling units with ancillary uses in areas away from developed communities. Small scale agriculture, including limited commercial agricultural activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-5 acres

TABLE 2: BUILDOUT OF BENTON VALLEY AND LAND USE DESIGNATIONS

Land Use Designation	Density	Acres	Percentage by Type	Maximum Potential Dwelling Units
RR Rural Residential	1 du/acre	1,799	4.1%	586 ^a
MU Mixed Use	15 du/acre	110	0.3%	1,650 ^b
RU Rural Resort	1 du/5 acres	35	0.1%	---
C Commercial	15 du/acre	15	0.0%	225 ^b
I Industrial	---	40	0.1%	---
PF Public/Quasi-Public Facilities	---	45	0.1%	---
RM Resource Management	1 du/40 acres	893	2.0%	22
AG Agriculture	1 du/2.5 ac.	3,578	8.2%	1,391 ^c
Total Private Lands		6,515	14.9%	3,874
RM Resource Management—Federal/State	---	37,248	85.1%	---
Total		43,763	100.0%	3,874

Notes: Calculations assume 2.51 people per dwelling unit; du = dwelling unit

- a. 492 acres RR; 288 acres RR 4 (4-acre minimum lot size); 16 acres RR 7 (7-acre minimum lot size); 775 acres RR 5 (5-acre minimum lot size); 134 acres RR 10 (10-acre minimum lot size); 234 acres RR 40 (40-acre minimum lot size).
- b. Assumes the development of a water and sewer system to obtain this density.
- c. 202 acres designated AG 5 (5 acre minimum lot size); 22 acres AG 7 (7-acre minimum lot size).

US 6. Residential development could also occur throughout the valley on agricultural lands. A large amount of the land designated for rural residential has large minimum lot sizes (4 acres or more) encouraging a low-density development pattern.

The Mono County Open Space and Conservation Elements requires remote parcels without services to be held to a minimum of 40 acres.

The Benton Community Visioning process was designed, in part, to proactively shape and guide the potential growth permitted by the current Land Use Plan element so that future growth is aligned with expressed community desires.

Table 2 provides acreage of developed land during buildout and indicates that up to 3,874 units could be built in the area, increasing the local population to over 9,000 people.

KEY LANDOWNERS

The predominance of land ownership by federal and state agencies for resource management purposes greatly influences land use patterns in Benton and throughout the Tri-Valley.

In Mono County, 97 percent of the land is publicly owned. In Benton this

figure is lower, at 85 percent. Over 37,000 acres in the Benton Valley are owned by Federal or State agencies for resource management purposes. The majority of the valley floor is managed by the Bureau of Land Management for habitat conservation and recreation. The mountains on either side of the valley are public lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Key landowners in Benton include

- Bureau of Land Management (BLM)
- Benton-Paiute Tribe
- Mono County

Figure 4 illustrates the pattern of parcel ownership in Benton.

Bureau of Land Management

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), an agency within the U.S. Department of the Interior, is responsible for management and conservation programs of resources on 258 million surface acres and 700 million acres of subsurface mineral estate in the United States. BLM is one of two primary public agency landowners in Mono County.

As part of its land management strategy, BLM regularly reviews its property inventory to release any lands that do not support its mission. Through

FIGURE 4: PARCEL OWNERSHIP

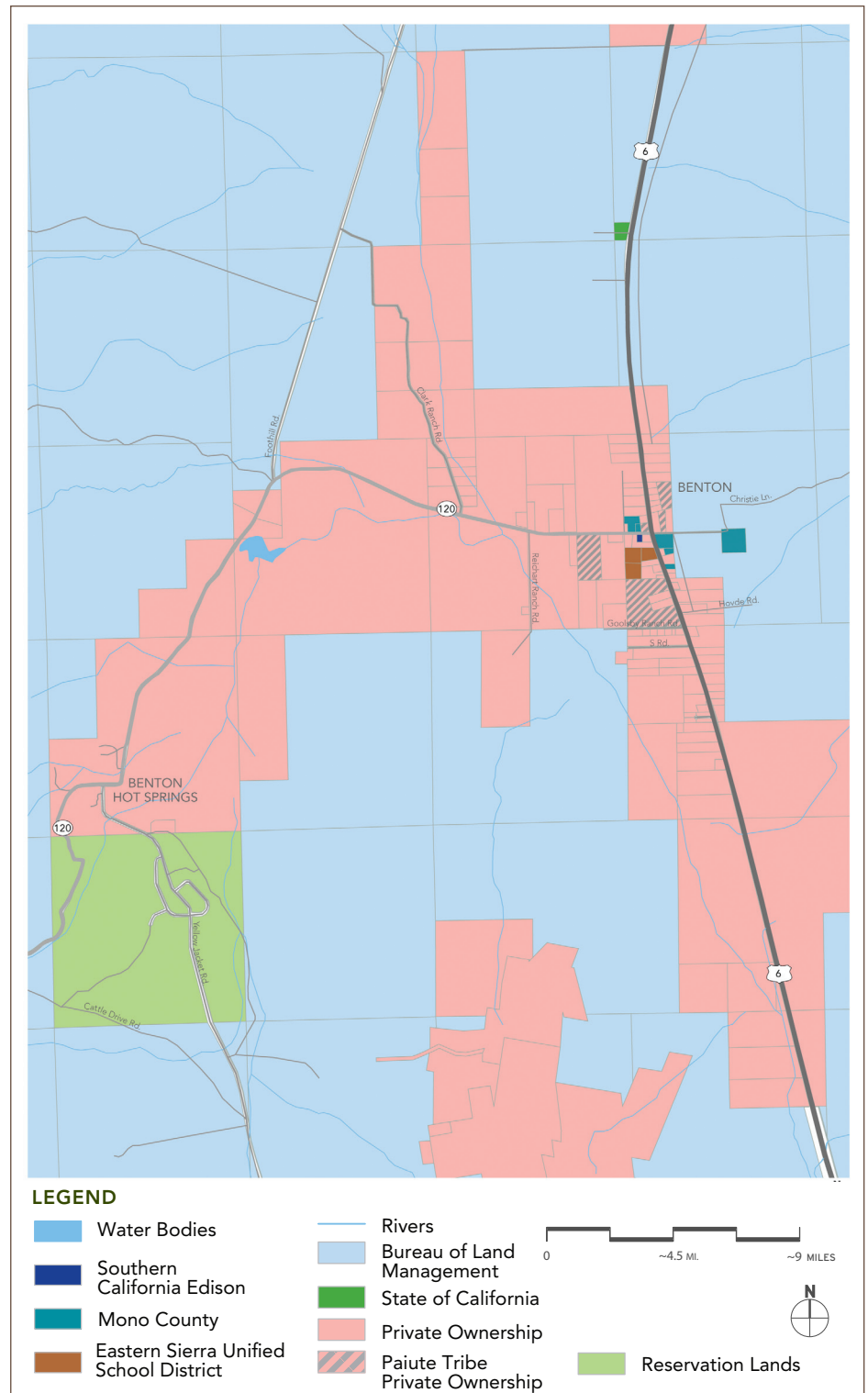
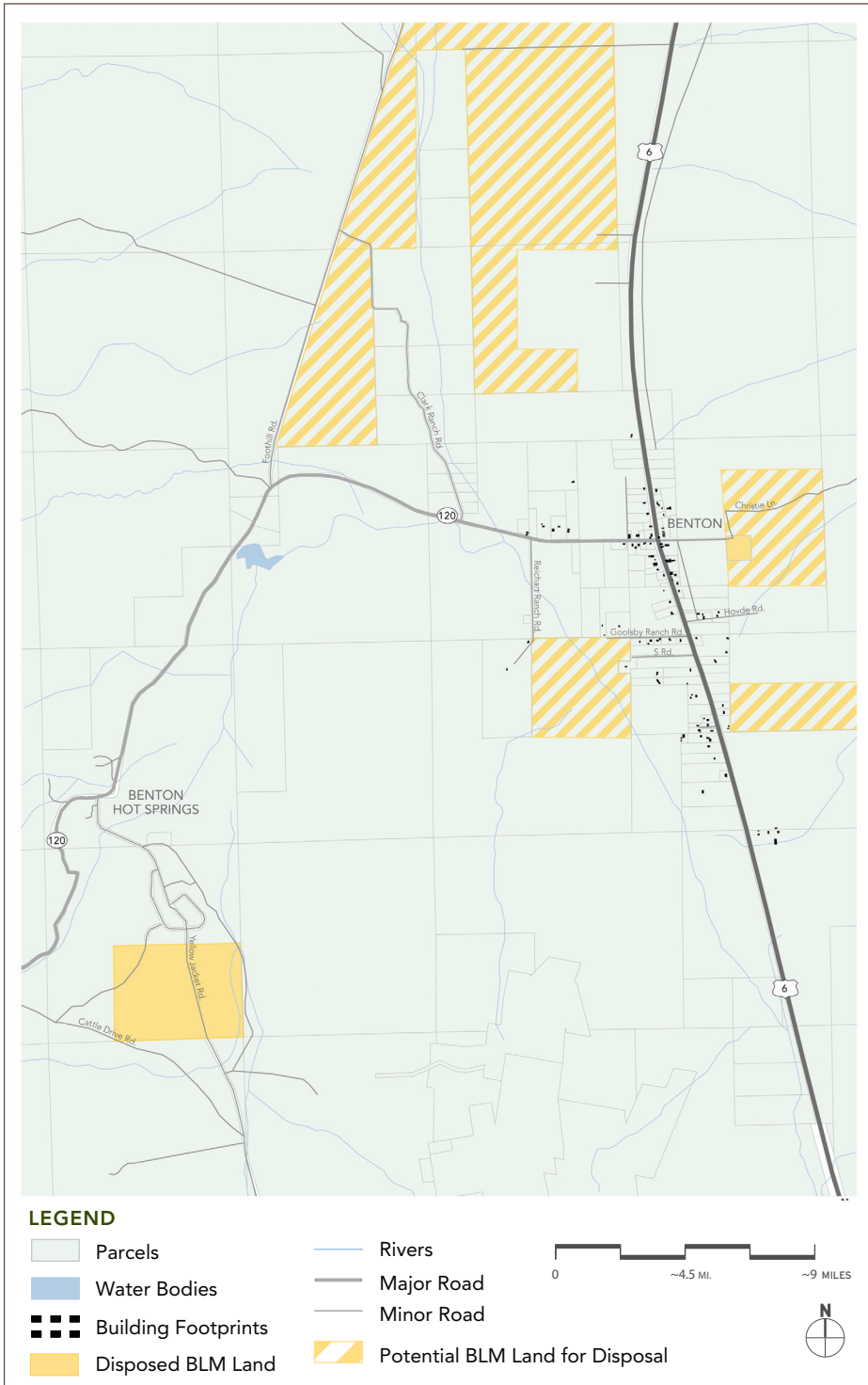


FIGURE 5: BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT DISPOSAL PARCELS



its Realty and Ownership program, BLM has assessed and evaluated its properties in the Benton area and determined that many of these open lands no longer support the BLM's ability to achieve its natural resource goals and can be released from the agency's holdings. These properties can then be disposed (i.e., sold or exchanged) to facilitate development. Lands are appraised and any exchanges must include non-federal lands of equivalent value.

There is a significant amount of BLM land that could be disposed of within Benton's local context. **Figure 5** illustrates lands that have been disposed of and potential acreage targeted for disposal. As **Figure 5** illustrates, there is a significant amount of land just beyond Benton's residential and commercial areas. The exchange of some or all of these lands could result in additional development or enhancement of public lands.

Benton-Paiute Tribe

The Paiute peoples' ancestors occupied the Eastern Sierra range for what is believed to be about 10,000 years. The Benton Paiute Reservation was established by Executive Order in 1915. Federal Tribal Status was established in 1976.

The tribe's mission is to provide governmental services to its citizens: health care and senior citizens programs through Toiyabe Indian Health Project; housing through the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Housing Improvement Program of the Bureau of Indian Affairs; and roads and street development using federal highway trust funds through the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The tribe owns significant acreage in the Benton area; therefore, tribal development activities have the potential to significantly affect the character of the community. The Benton-Paiute Tribe owns five key parcels in Benton with a total area of approximately 58 acres in Benton, including Benton Station/Café, a store, café and gas station located at the 120/6 intersection.

Additionally, the tribe has supported economic development activities such as the Superior Saddle Tree Company, a business located on a 33-acre parcel south of the Benton Hot Springs (zoned Rural Residential) that recently closed. The tribal land is home to a community center, health clinic as well as the Superior Saddle Tree Com-



pany, a micro-economic development project.

Additional Rural Residential (8.26 acres total), Commercial (2 acres) and Agricultural (15) designated parcels owned by the tribe are located in proximity to the 120/6 intersection.

In addition to these lands, the tribe was recently awarded 220 acres of land with sovereign nation status from the BLM located adjacent to existing tribal lands to the south of Benton Hot Springs. Development activities on these properties could have an impact on the future of Benton.



Mono County

Mono County owns land parcels in proximity to the 120/6 intersection. These parcels total approximately 20 acres and are designated Public Facilities including a park, community service facilities and two workforce housing projects that were built to supplement housing opportunities in the area.

Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP)

In addition to BLM, LADWP is one of the primary public agency landowners in the County. Established more than 100 years ago, the LADWP is the largest municipal utility in the United States and delivers water and power to some 3.8 million residents and businesses in Los Angeles. The Department provides water to 640,000 customers and electricity to 1.4 million customers. The LADWP owns the majority of the surface and subsurface water in Mono County.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES

While the population of Benton is small, the community is served by an assortment of commercial, service-oriented, educational and recreational facilities:

- White Mountain Fire Protection District Station
- Edna Beaman Elementary School
- Mono County Library Facility
- Benton Senior Center
- Ida Lynn Parkinson Park
- U.S. Post Office
- Mono County Road Shop
- Benton Transfer Station

The White Mountain Fire Protection District Station provides fire protection services for the community and region. The Edna Beaman Elementary School serves the community's school-aged children in grades K-8. The Mono County Library Facility provides library services and Benton Senior Center offer senior services for the older adult community. Ida Lynn Parkinson Park is a community park located in proximity to the 120/6 intersection and provides a basketball court and play area.

These facilities meet Benton's basic needs; however, as described in the following section of this report, current residents are interested in additional services and facilities and recognize that some growth may be required to support them.

CIRCULATION

State and federal highways bisect Benton, providing connections for regional, interregional and local travelers. State highways are managed by Caltrans, an integral partner in planning the future of the community, as balancing the various needs of travelers is a Caltrans mandate.

Benton's circulation is defined by the 120/6 intersection, highways that facilitate local, interregional, and regional traffic. US 6 serves as a conduit for truck traffic through Benton, providing a connection to distribution centers to the north in Nevada and to the south in Southern California. Trucks and other vehicles along US 6 often travel at high speeds. Roadside parking and chain installation requirements also contribute to safety issues since truckers must often remove chains along US 6 near Benton with little available room to do so.

US Highway 6

US 6, which extends north-south through Benton, is designated under the following standards and designations that Caltrans maintains:

- Part of the National Truck Network or Surface Transportation Assistance Act (STAA); in compliance



with STAA, trucks are allowed on route on US 6.

- Part of the Extralegal Load Network, which allows for vehicles that exceed that STAA size limits such as escorted "wide loads." US 395, which joins US 6 in Bishop, is part of this same network.
- Defined as an Interregional Road System Route (IRRS); it is part of a network of circulation routes to enable goods and services to travel across state borders and through regional areas.
- Part of the National Highway System (NHS) and part of the Strategic Highway Network (STRAHNET); it is part of the system dedicated to



the mobilization and deployment of military forces, equipment, and for utilization in emergency capacities in times of peace and war.

Due to these designations, US 6 will continue to be a major thoroughfare for large trucks and will always serve as a part of a regional transportation network. These standards impose restrictions on Caltrans' ability to make certain changes to the primary character of the roadway as it passes through the Benton community.

State Route 120

SR 120, which extends west-east and

terminates at the 120/6 intersection, is a two-lane conventional highway. SR 120 serves as a connection for vehicular traffic to Lee Vining and Yosemite for parts of the year. Seasonal closings of SR 120 East hinder vehicular circulation to Lee Vining and Yosemite for portions of the year. Largely due to some very sharp curves, SR 120 East has restricted use for vehicles with kingpin-to-rear-axle length in excess of 40 feet, which includes many motor coaches and motorhomes.

Benton Crossing Road

Benton Crossing Road is a two-lane road that provides a year-round connection between SR 120 and US 395. The 34-mile stretch of road is a vital connection for residents, commuters and travelers alike between Benton and western destinations such as Mammoth Lakes. The current topography and configuration of Benton Crossing Road limits the passage of long vehicles such as tour buses.

Transit Services

Transit Services in the Tri-Valley are provided by Inyo-Mono Transit (IMT). IMT provides local Dial-A-Ride service in Benton and twice-weekly roundtrip service from Benton to Bishop.

Other Transportation Modes

Informal trails and pedestrian pathways are available (but not formally designated) in and around Benton, however, there are no sidewalks. Some bicyclists use US 6 for touring.

NATURAL RESOURCES

Benton is surrounded by vast public open space. Water and access to surrounding public open space are two of the most significant concerns of local residents.

Water

The Tri-Valley watershed is a tributary to the Owens River. Streams originating in the White Mountains contribute most of the runoff in the watershed. An ephemeral wash that drains the length of the watershed from Benton to Laws in Inyo County is the main stem of the drainage system. Most of the runoff is either captured as surface water and used as irrigation for agricultural practices or drains into the valley's deep alluvium and is captured as groundwater. There is one surface water resource: Fish Slough, a protected wetlands area in the southwest corner of Chalfant Valley. Located on BLM lands, Fish Slough is a significant surface water resource in the Tri-Valley.



Water is a valuable resource in Benton and the region. The County's *Surface Water and Groundwater Availability Assessment—Tri-Valley Area* discusses existing water resource management and conditions. Domestic water is supplied with groundwater, and sewage is treated by individual septic systems. Agricultural irrigation is supplied primarily by pumped groundwater and limited surface water diversions. Surface water is diverted for irrigation, stock watering, wildlife, and recreational uses. Existing water rights for the diversion of surface water are maintained by BLM, LADWP, and various private entities and persons.



Future Tri-Valley area surface water usage depends on the pattern of growth in the area, future agricultural practices and water level trends. If agricultural lands that currently use surface water are converted to residential land uses or conversion of agriculture to less water-intensive crops, surface water usage will decrease. Conversely, if water levels continue to decrease, a greater reliance on surface water may result, adding pressure to the existing water supply.

Topography

Topography within the Tri-Valley region is characterized by flat-floored valleys, gently sloping alluvial fans

along the sides of the valley floors, and steep slopes above the alluvial fans. The three valleys that comprise the Tri-Valley region are bound on the east by the White Mountains and on the west by the southeast sloping lava flows of the Volcanic Tablelands and the Benton Range.

Visually, Benton is quite exposed, with sweeping views of the surrounding mountains. The valley floor is relatively flat and there is little screening vegetation. Consequentially, development and agricultural uses are noticeable. Communities are nestled in surrounding sagebrush scrub and agricultural land.



Public Lands For Recreation

Benton residents and visitors utilize surrounding public lands for a variety of recreational activities including hiking, biking, horse riding and ATV use.

Since its early days as a mining town, Benton has offered residents and visitors with awe-inspiring surroundings and access to an impressive array of natural areas. Benton's unique rural character is defined by its vast surrounding public lands. Located in proximity to hiking, rock climbing, wildlife viewing, and other opportunities, Benton offers a world-class recreational experience.

