

Boulder Junction Economic Development Committee
Spring Business Forum Summary
April 28, 2026
Topic: Fishing Guide Industry and Business Collaboration

Attendees: Kevin Mantz, Steve Weber, Dylan Schutt, Mary Jones, Ian Brown, Kevin Gutjar, Marv Thiel, Linda Thiel, Bob Bertch, Mike Errington, Samuel Hiller, Royce Zehr, Amanda Chartrand, Joh Altschwager, David Mayegu, Randy Schultz, Sara Smith, Erv Keller, Mike MacKenzie, Dennis Reuss, Howard Bass, Bill Sherer, Jeff Boneck

On April 28, 2026, the Boulder Junction Economic Development Committee hosted its Spring Business Forum, focusing on the Fishing Guide Industry and opportunities for business collaboration. The panel discussion was organized by Kevin Mantz and Ian Brown and featured a diverse group of experienced guides along with Royce Zehr, Regional Team Supervisor for Fisheries with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources.

Panel participants included Sam Hiller, Bob Bertch, Mike Errington, Erv Keller, Bill Sherer, and Howard Bass. The discussion covered a wide range of topics including fishery conditions, customer trends, access, business challenges, and long-term sustainability.

Key Findings and Industry Insights

1. Industry Strength and Collaboration

There is a strong sense of cooperation among local fishing guides, with many sharing information and working together to maintain a high-quality experience for visitors. Approximately 75% of guide clients are repeat customers, reinforcing the strength of relationships and overall satisfaction with the Boulder Junction fishing experience. Nearly all customers are from outside the area, highlighting the industry's importance to the local tourism economy.

Guides also reported exceptionally strong demand for their services. Many indicated that they are already heavily booked, with some fully committed through the upcoming summer season. This level of advance booking reflects both the reputation of the area's fisheries and the continued strength of fishing as a primary driver of visitation.

2. Changing Customer Expectations

The traditional fishing client base is evolving. What was once a predominantly male-driven activity is now shifting toward a more family-oriented experience. Clients are increasingly seeking a complete outdoor experience rather than focusing solely on catching large fish. This includes scenery, education, comfort, and time spent together, which presents an opportunity for broader business collaboration across lodging, dining, and recreation providers.

The guides expressed a clear willingness to partner with local businesses to enhance this full experience. By working more closely with lodging providers, restaurants, and other recreational offerings, there is an opportunity to encourage clients to extend their stays in Boulder Junction, increasing overall economic impact.

3. Fishery Conditions and Resource Pressures

Panelists indicated that musky populations remain strong, although increased fishing pressure is a growing concern. In contrast, walleye and northern pike populations are perceived to be in decline. Concerns were raised that current regulations, including the 14-inch minimum walleye slot limit, may be contributing to overharvest of male fish and negatively impacting reproduction.

Additionally, bass predation on walleye fry was identified as a contributing factor in reduced walleye recruitment. There is also a perception that changes in stocking practices, combined with spearing activity, have contributed to a decline in natural reproduction, whether real or perceived.

4. Habitat and Management Gaps

A consistent theme throughout the discussion was the need for greater emphasis on habitat improvement and prey species management. Panelists noted that these foundational elements are currently under-addressed and directly influence the health and sustainability of predator fish populations.

Rivers and streams were specifically identified as being neglected within current management strategies, despite their importance to the broader ecosystem.

5. Perception vs. Reality

There is a growing perception among anglers that Canadian fisheries offer a superior experience. However, the panel clarified that this perception is often based on the likelihood of catching larger fish, rather than an overall better fishery. Boulder Junction and surrounding waters continue to provide a high-quality, well-rounded fishing experience, but messaging and expectations may need to be better aligned.

6. Access and Barriers to Participation

Limited walk-in fishing access and the cost of entry were identified as significant barriers, particularly for younger and first-time anglers. Boat ramp fees, equipment costs, and guide rates all contribute to making the sport less accessible.

The group acknowledged efforts by the DNR to expand fishing access through the development of additional piers and agreed that this should be actively pursued in the Boulder Junction area.

The loss of the Environmental Education program at Crystal Lake was also noted as a significant setback. Panelists emphasized that without opportunities to introduce and educate young people, long-term participation in fishing and hunting will continue to decline.

7. Technology and Resource Pressure

Advancements in fishing technology have made it significantly easier to locate and target large fish. While effective, many guides expressed concern that this is increasing pressure on key species and reducing the challenge and sustainability of the sport. There is a general sentiment among guides that technology use should be balanced with conservation principles.

8. Enforcement and Regulation

A lack of consistent enforcement on local lakes was identified as a concern. Panelists reported issues with poaching and non-compliance with bag limits, which undermines conservation efforts and impacts long-term fishery health.

9. Communication and Data Opportunities

The current DNR stocking program lacks visibility among both guides and the public. Increased communication and transparency would help build trust and understanding.

Panelists also recommended the development of an annual survey of local fishing guides to capture real-time observations and trends from those who are on the water daily. This data could serve as a valuable complement to formal biological assessments.

10. Economic Considerations

There was general agreement that guide fees and fishing license fees have not kept pace with inflation, having remained largely unchanged since 2005. While increases may be warranted, careful consideration is needed to balance economic sustainability with accessibility.

Strategic Takeaways

The Fishing Guide Industry remains a vital and currently strong component of Boulder Junction's economy, supported by high demand, strong collaboration, loyal clientele, and a high-quality natural resource base. The willingness of guides to partner with local businesses presents a clear opportunity to expand the economic impact of each visitor through longer stays and enhanced experiences.

However, several challenges must be addressed to ensure long-term sustainability:

- Strengthen habitat and ecosystem management

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- Improve communication and transparency around fisheries management
 - Expand public access and reduce barriers for new participants
 - Reinforce education and youth engagement in outdoor activities
 - Balance technology use with conservation principles
 - Enhance enforcement to protect the resource
 - Leverage the shift toward experiential tourism through broader business collaboration
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Next Steps for Consideration

The forum highlighted several actionable opportunities:

- Partner with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to explore expanded habitat and access initiatives
- Develop a local guide survey program to inform decision-making
- Advocate for improved communication on stocking and management practices
- Evaluate opportunities to reintroduce or support youth outdoor education programs
- Coordinate with local businesses and guides to package and promote extended-stay experiences
- Explore policy discussions around fees, access, and enforcement